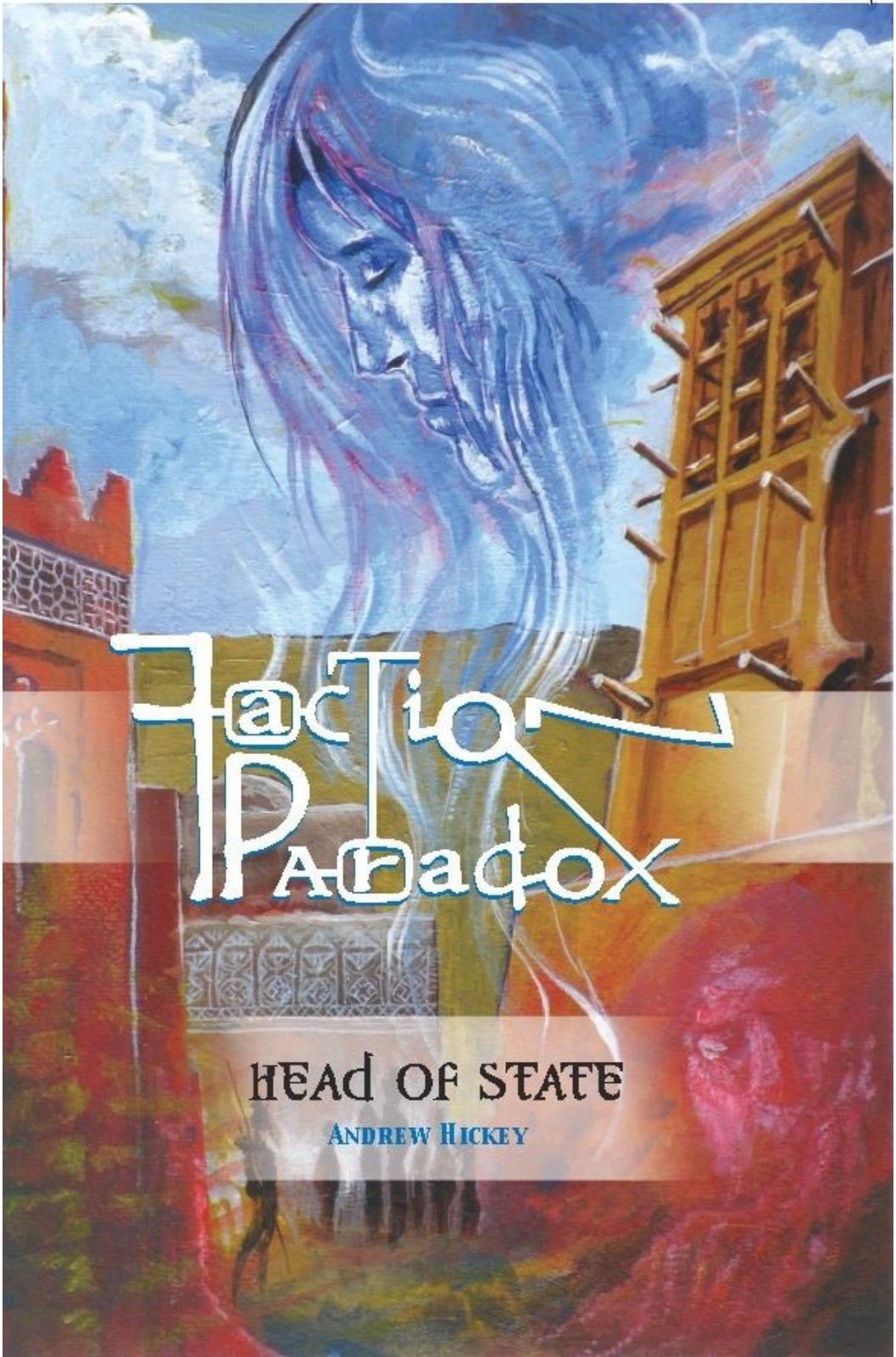
Factio Paradox
Head of State
Andrew Hickey

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HEAD OF STATE

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"When the Seventh Head speaks, the War shall end, and the true War shall begin."

Baron Amatsumara: Mujun, The Ghost Kingdom (deleted scene)

Prologue

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part one

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionating, the Compassionate!

It is related (and Allah is all-knowing) that King Shahryár did, after the one thousand nights and a night in which Shahrazad told him the tales of the ruined man of Baghdad and his slave-girl, and the tale of Ibrahim of Mosul and the Devil, and the tale of the woman who made her husband sift dust, and many other tales, give to Shahrazad the boon of her life.

This has come down to us (and Allah is all-knowing), but a darker tale has come down alongside it, and it would not be meet to keep this tale untold, for only Allah now knows the truth of the matter.

It is related (by those who relate such things) that on the night after the one thousandth night, when she had told the tale of Ma'aruf the cobbler and of his wife, that Shahrazad did beg her husband, King Shahryár, that she be allowed to see her sons, and on seeing them did beg for her life.

But while some say that the heart of King Shahryár then softened to Shahrazad, and that he allowed her to live, and that his brother King Shah Zaman did take Shahrazad's sister Dunyazad as his handmaid, it is also related that King Shahryár spake thus:

"O Shahrazad, thou art chaste and pure, ingenious and pious! I will give thee thy life gladly, for thou hast pleased me greatly lo these thousand nights and a night. But grant me first one final story, before I pardon thee."

And Shahrazad, gladdened in her heart that she would be granted her life that night, agreed and began the

TALE OF THE MALAKH

"It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that in the barbarian lands to the West there dwelt…"

She stopped.

"O my handmaiden, why hast thou stopped in your telling of this tale?"

"I know not," saith Shahrazad. "I shall try again." And so she began again the

TALE OF THE MALAKH

"It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that in the barbarian lands to the West there dwelt…"

She stopped again.

"Sire, I cannot continue. I know not why, but this story will not be told, try as I may."

And King Shahryár wept, for he remembered that he had sworn an oath to Allah, the creator of all things, that he would see that any woman with whom he had had his carnal will executed. And such oaths, however regretted, must be kept. Shahrazad had been able to stay her execution with her tales, but Shahryár's obligation to Allah the almighty must be kept.

And so at dawn, Shahrazad walked out into the palace courtyard, and did so with her head held high. Truly is it said of her:

Her beauty passeth all her sex * Her courage and her grace
All women in the Caliphate * Between cannot replace

For she showed no fear as she knelt before the headsman, and said only to King Shahryár "I forgive you. God is the greatest!"

And as the headsman drew his sword, and cleft off Shahrazad's head, King Shahryár prostrated himself in front of her and wept sore, and as her head fell he caught it and clutched it to his bosom, and rent his robes in despair.

And then Shahrazad's head opened its eyes, and looked up at the King, and spake thusly:

TALE OF THE MALAKH

"It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that in the barbarian lands to the

West there dwelt a Malakh…”

Chapter 1

From *radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com,* November 15th, 10:10PM

Well, it's been a while, hasn't it?

I know I've not updated this blog in forever, but things have been moving fast. I'm sure you all saw that I lost my column in *New Progressive* magazine, when they cut the page count (print media cutting costs? I'm shocked! Shocked!), but luckily I've got a new assignment, which will be much more fun than writing a column about what seems an increasingly futile youth resistance to an increasingly noxious government.

Boys and girls, I'm going to America! (Sings: "We're the kids in America, whoa-oa!")

John Lyman, the editor of the *Sunday Herald,* got in touch with me last week. They want a radical, young voice to look at the primaries this year, because it's looking like the first actual open race for the presidency in about twenty years.

The pay isn't great (journalism being underpaid? I'm shocked! etc.) but I get a regular byline in the most readable of what we laughingly call the quality papers, a free holiday in America (visit sunny Iowa! In January! Where the temperature sometimes enters positive numbers!) and all the hotel towels I can steal.

More importantly, I'll get to see the political process from the inside, in a way I never have before. In a lot of ways the US is still (Goddess help us) the only country in the world that actually matters, and yet I've never spent much time in their political circles, except to throw stones at them from a crowd of protestors (note to any Homeland Security bods reading, that was a joke) (it wasn't a joke). Hanging round with an Actual Senator, even one from one of the flyover states nobody in Britain knows anything about, for a month or two could be fun (yes, that *is* my definition of fun. No, I don't get out much, why do you ask?).

Anyway, I fly out in three days to start following the preparation for the primary campaigns. I'll be going out for goodbye drinks on Friday, since I don't know when I'll be back (technically, he *could* go all the way and then I'd be there for the next year or so, though somehow I don't think that's too likely). You know where, unless you're one of the creepy blokes who started following me and sending me photos of your genitalia after I got the

Progressive column, in which case you really don't need to know. **Oh no, it's all happening again…**

Also, does anyone have any suggestions for things I should do while I'm there? The campaign trail is going to be pretty intense, but I only have to file two thousand words or so a week while I'm there, so I should have at least a little downtime. The only bits of the US I've ever been to before have been on the East Coast, so I know nothing at all of the Midwest except what I read in *American Gods* (that *was* a non-fiction book, right? Gneil wouldn't lie to us…) and Garrison Keillor books. I'm a city girl, and I suspect there'll be a wee bit of adjusting to do, so if any of my USian friends have any advice, I'm all ears (waggles ears as proof).**Hello?**

Anyway, chances are that this thing will be updated a bit more over the next few weeks. Looking at the itinerary, it looks like I'll mostly be spending time in the kind of places where their idea of vegan food is to take the bacon out of a BLT and where the only entertainment is cow-tipping, and so I'll be writing a lot, and of course the *Herald* want proper writing, as if I was a grown-up, not the freeform word-jazz for which I am loved and feared in equal measures by my journalfriends. So expect a lot of Serious, Weighty, Political Analysis(TM) in my Nelson columns (do you see what I did there? I am funny) every Sunday, and a lot of complaints about a potato-based diet on here.

Anyway, I'm off to pack my best pulling pants – I've heard they go wild for a British accent over there. See some of you on Friday.

Comments:

Joanne 10:20PM:

Congratulations, mate! I thought they had reporters over there already for that kind of thing, though? Either way, see you You Know Where!

Rachel 1AM:

They do, but there's an absolute metric fuckton of candidates in the race this year. They're sending their normal political journalists, the usual middle-aged lairy old blokes, to cover all the people who might actually win the thing. You know, O'Brien, Lehman, Gorshin, the usual gang of idiots.

Along with that, though, they're going to send over a bunch of "less mainstream" people to cover the ones who don't have much of a chance.

So they're sending Patrick Weatherall over to shadow Carl Ingleton, the religious-right lunatic (sorry, that's a bit ableist, isn't it? It's true though…) who is trying to get the Repugnican nomination – since Weatherall is so reactionary he actually makes Ingleton look like Gramsci, this may lead to the *Herald* being the only paper to attack Ingleton for being too woolly and liberal. Which should be interesting, if nothing else.

Sarah 1:15AM:

So who are you covering, then? I'd have had you down (fnaar fnaar) as an O'Brien girl.

Rachel 1:16AM

You can have me any way you like, baby! But I'm covering the one actual left-wing candidate in the race, Matt Nelson, at least until he inevitably drops out, which I give until Super Tuesday at the latest. Well, I say left-wing – he's the only one in either party whose policies would be out of place in UKIP's manifesto, but that's America for you. I'm pretty sure that if you take every fifth letter of Ingleton's manifesto, it spells "God says kill the darkies". (Yes, Ingleton's manifesto *is* short. His voters aren't keen on reading, or book-larnin' as they call it).

L 1:30AM:

Beware, for you will surely meet your doom.

Rachel 2:08AM:

Thank you for that entirely uncreepy and not at all completely bonkers-in-the-nut response, "L".

Tim 9AM December 16th:

Whose going to cover Ron Harrison? He's the only one whose offering anything really different!

Rachel 12PM:

Yes, he's certainly that, if by "different" you mean a nutty libertarian wingnut who still manages to be anti-abortion and hate women and POCs just as much as all the other Repugnicans do. Peter Manford's going to be covering his campaign. Which is nice for Manford as it'll be a long gig. Having seen how Harrison behaved in the last few elections, he'll probably keep campaigning even after inauguration day, and his libertarian followers will still keep talking about how he can win it.

Chapter 2

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

It has been suggested by some that I should put down for posterity an account of the circumstances behind my induction into the organisation to which this missive, written *currente calamo* but not, I hope, to be taken as evidence of *cacoethes scribendi*, is dedicated, and which it is meet not to mention, at least in terms which the profane masses will readily comprehend.

It was in the spring of 18__ that I was first approached by Lord M_____, the head of the Star Chamber. I had been associated with this organisation, which many among the cowans believe long-dissolved, for many years, yet this was the first time I became acquainted with its inner circle.

I had been expecting such a summons for some time. While the ostensible purpose of the Star Chamber, to those who were aware of it at all, was merely to act as an adjunct to the government in regards to some trivial ecclesiastical administrative matters, it was the *consensus gentium* that it was in fact a *consensus audacium* – that it was a secret conspiracy, whose purpose was not the rooting out of impurities of the faith, but rather the rooting out of impurities in the blood. This consensus I knew, from personal experience, to be accurate.

Lord M_____ had been apprised of my suitability for a mission which, he informed me, was of the utmost importance for the survival of the Empire, and possibly even of Christendom itself. None-the-less, I gathered from his conduct that he was not fully convinced of my reliability, and it was only upon my swearing to many and varied oaths, pledges and affirmations, with threats of the most terrible and fearsome penalties for their contravention, that he would inform me of the reason he had chosen to call upon my talents.

I had been sent on several missions for the Star Chamber before, usually to those iniquitous yet ubiquitous houses which have been with us since time immemorial, and which one suspects will be with us for many years to come, despite the efforts of Mrs. Butler. On each of those occasions, my

task had been to destroy what can only be described as succubi, or sometimes incubi (and, on one regrettable occasion, a single cambion). The number of these events had been increasing rapidly, and I had long suspected that I would be sent to investigate the source of the contagion.

This source, many among those who understood such things had conjectured, was in the Orient, and more precisely in those Arabian lands which I, uniquely among Englishmen, knew and understood. The source was among the Mal'akhim.

Those of my readers who have not my knowledge of the Orient may not have heard tell of the Mal'akhim of Araby, but I believe that due to the literary efforts of Mr Prest (or the inferior scribblings of Doctor Polidori), even the most sheltered members of this august organisation will be familiar with the legends of the Vampyres of Rumania and Hungary. Of the truth of these tales I know nothing, and therefore cannot speak, but if they do exist they are undoubtedly kin to the lesser-known Mal'akhim.

These Arabian Vampyres (for so we may call them) have the aspect of men, yet their appearance is deceptive. It is said of them that they are dead men, risen from the grave in a grotesque parody of Christ's own ascent, yet if this is true they put the lie to the aphorism, and we can say truthfully *mortui mordent*, for these dead men make their repast on the blood of the living.

They are known to be able to change their shape **CAN YOU READ THIS?** at will, and **HELLO?** to be able to capture the minds of the more weak-willed among us and bend them to their own purposes.

Lord M_____ informed me that Her Majesty's Government had been received information to the effect that these Mal'akhim were real, and that they were in possession of an artefact – a book – which were it to be misused could cause incalculable harm to the British government's interests in Arabia.

Naturally, no official action could be taken against these evil spirits, if indeed that is what they were. The British Empire stands for Science, for Reason and for Christianity. To acknowledge some truth in the backward superstitions of the tribesmen would cause as much damage as the worst evil spirit ever could[1]. Yet at the same time, Her Majesty's Government was desirous of information pertaining to any activities that could affect her interests.

While my reputation among the highest ranks was not as unsullied as

one might hope, I had certain advantages that made me suitable for this mission. To whit, I had spent months living as a Mahometan, and even made pilgrimage to Meccah, without arousing the suspicion of the Mussulmen. I knew the ways, behaviours and lores of those peoples far better than any man in England. I also, even at that tender age, had attained a certain degree of notoriety thanks to my travels. Were I to be unmasked, no-one would suspect that I was acting from any motive other than my own curiosity.

Naturally, I readily accepted the task I was given, as any red-blooded Englishman would. To travel *incognito* through the uncharted deserts of Araby, where no white man had trodden since Alexander, and to steal from a race of daemons the artefact that gave them their power over men – truly, this was adventure! This was glory! This was something that could never be understood by the epicene aesthetes who in their serried ranks strive only to keep the exceptional man in check!

Of the initial stages of my journey there is not much to say. The journey from England to Arabia is one I have made on many occasions, and familiarity makes it wearisome. My principal aim during this journey was to take on once again the aspect and mannerisms of a *Darwaysh* and so hope to avoid the suspicion of the tribesmen. Despite the numerous obvious differences between myself and the Shemite peoples who make up the bulk of what the ignorant consider the Arabic race (a "race" that consists of at least three distinct peoples), the physical preparations for this required no more onerous changes than a shaven head and a full beard[2], along with the deep tan one naturally obtains when spending long periods under the Oriental sun.

Rather, I needed all my attention on the steamer voyage in order once again to perfect the mannerisms of the Oriental – not those gross differences which are obvious to all (and which often fall away once the Arab is away from the European presence) but those subtle differences in posture, stance and expression which we only notice in their absence. My habits had to change along with my manner. No more could I eat pork, bacon, or other such staples of the English diet. I had to refuse all wine and beer, for though many in Araby are as fond of such as any white man, the Holy Qu'ran forbids them, and far better when attempting to pass unnoticed in another country to adopt all the manners of that society.

I knew I had succeeded when one Major Gregory, who had boarded with us at Portsmouth and had immediately succumbed to *mal de mer*,

upon emerging from his cabin a week later, immediately upon seeing me upbraided me for not showing the proper deference to a white man. I, of course, apologised profusely for such an unforgivable lapse.

Chapter 3

Hi…er…hi. I'm Dave Larsen. If you're watching this, it's probably because I've succeeded. So…ah… hi, Mom! I'm on TV!

That's not really appropriate, is it?

Sorry. I get nervous with this sort of thing. What am I saying, this sort of thing? Like I've ever done anything like this before. "Oh yeah, I make videos to be shown after my own death all the time. I do it Sunday evenings after football games."

Sorry. I should really focus, shouldn't I? That's what Helen used to say. "You need to focus more." She said that all the time.

So, if you're watching this it's because I've killed the President, and you want to know why. Probably the papers have been full of all sorts of lies – the mainstream media making up all kinds of bullshit about how I did it because I hate the blacks or the gays or something, like they always do.

So listen, I don't like liberals, but I'm no hatemonger. I got nothing against the blacks or the gays or the Jews or anything else – they don't bother me, I don't bother them, you get me?

I never, ever, want to hurt anybody. Even Helen would say that. She said I was too much of a wimp.

Sorry…let me back up.

It's going to take a little bit of time to explain this. You don't just wake up one day and think "I know, I'll go and shoot the President." Well, some people might, but I don't. So stay with me. You might want to get yourself a cup of coffee and settle down, this'll take a while.

See, I've never been keen on the liberals. I'm an American, and proud of it, and I just don't understand why they want to do that down. I mean, would you rather live in America, or in some country like France where the government locks you up if you say something they don't like and where your taxes go to pay for abortions? It's just common sense, right?

But, you know, I was never the most political guy. I voted when I remembered to, but never really got worked up about it.

But then my Helen left me…and, you know, it just ain't right, whatever the feminists say, that I would go out to work every day of my life while

she stayed home with the kids, and then she can just go off with another man but I have to keep sending her the money. That just isn't right. You can't expect a real man to live like that.

Don't worry, I'm getting to my reasons. It's just… this isn't as easy to explain as you might think.

So, yeah, Helen left me. And…that wasn't a good time. When I wasn't at work, I pretty much sat around in my jockey shorts watching TV and drinking. And I started watching this cable news guy, Ted Beckley, who seemed to know what he was talking about.

Now, I ain't as smart as Ted, so I don't explain it as good as him, but he said that the reason all the shitty things in the world today are happening the way they do – the reason for all these wars we keep having to get into, and the reason the gas prices keep rising and I have to work more and I can't afford health insurance – is because the liberals are all working with the banks, to take all our money.

Like, the liberals'll make up some bullcrap about how the world's getting hotter, and how this means we have to stop using the old kinds of gas and use some new one. So then all the gas stations have to change their pumps, and all the car companies have to make new kindsa cars, and that all costs money, right? So they borrow the money from the banks, who lend it to them at interest. So in order to pay the banks back they have to raise the price of gas, so I have to work Saturdays now, just to get enough money to pay for the gas to get me to work in the first place!

So yeah, I mean, I'm not telling you like Ted could, you know with all the details, but the guy just…he just *made sense*, right? I mean, *somebody's* gotta be getting rich off of this stuff, and it sure as hell ain't me, and if you're watching this I'm betting it ain't you, either, right?

So anyway, it turns out Ted has this website. He talks about it sometimes on his show. You pay a couple dollars a month and you can talk to other people who watch his show and who are concerned about the same thing. He says it used to be free, but then liberals kept coming on and trash-talking the decent people there, who were just trying to have a conversation about the stuff that concerned them. Apparently the liberals like doing that kind of thing, but they're too cheap to pay for the privilege, so Ted says that for us to have our free speech, we need to pay. He says smart things like that.

So I start going to his site, and talking to people, and I learned all kinds

of interesting things there. Like about the admiralty law and how if you're a free man the government can't make you pay your taxes, and about how the banks create money out of thin air, and lots of other stuff. Seriously, some of this stuff is hard to believe, but the evidence is out there if you look.

So I started talking to these people more, and telling them about how Helen left me, and how I was having to pay all this child support, and they told me that I didn't have to – that I, as a sovereign citizen, didn't have to pay a nickel towards anything if I hadn't signed a contract. They said that if the government wanted someone to pay for the kids, they could pay it from the bonds they took out on them at birth. Let the liberals spend some of that money they've been taking from us.

That sounded pretty damn good to me, I have to say.

So I decided to become one of these sovereign citizens. Helen started whining after the free money stopped rolling in, of course, but I told her to go crying to her liberal government buddies if she wanted money. She told me she was a Republican, which…of course, she is, but she's still a liberal. She's like John McCain or someone. If she wasn't, she'd have known a woman's place is with her man, wouldn't she?

I'm sorry, I'm getting off the subject again. It's…it's hard, y'know, trying to explain all this. This is the most important thing ever – I'm actually saving history here. It's… it's not easy knowing you're going to give up your life to save the world.

But I'm trying to give you all the information, my reasons for doing this. For shooting him. And my reasons really start there, with this forum, and with the day I got the message.

I signed on to the forum one day, almost a year ago now, just before Christmas, and saw a message there, saying "HI DAVE, CAN YOU READ THIS?" – all caps, you know? – from someone with no user name.

Now I didn't think you could do that – you have to sign in using your user name – but I'm not a computer expert, and I don't know what people can do. So of course, I just post a quick reply, saying "Yeah, I can read that. Who are you?"

And then I get a weird response, from one of the other guys – Patriot76 I think it was – saying "What? I don't get it."

So I say "What don't you get? The other guy asked me if I could read

his post, so I said I could."

Then Patriot says "What other guy?"

So I say "The other guy who posted at the top of the thread!"

And Patriot replies "You're at the top of the thread!"

I ask him what he's talking about, and then three of the others all jump in saying that I'd started the thread, and then one of the moderators jumps in and says I'm trolling. He blocks me, and I have to pay a Good Citizen Fine of five dollars to be allowed back on the board, and when I get back the thread's been deleted. I forgot about it for a while, but looking back, that was the start of it.

Excuse me, I gotta go to the bathroom. I'll be right back.

Chapter 4

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part two

TALE OF THE MAL'AKH

It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that in the barbarian lands to the West there dwelt a Mal'akh. The Mal'akh are a long-lived race, but only Allah is immortal, and this Mal'akh feared death, for it is said that the Mal'akh[3], being the spawn of daemons who have lain with women, have no souls, for Allah will not give the gift of a soul to a daemon.

Now the land in which this Mal'akh lived was ruled over by a Shaykh[4], wise and beneficent, who had ruled long and well. His hair and beard had grown as silver as the moon, but his belly was swollen and full, for he had conquered many lands and made them his own. Yet his people also had full bellies and fuller hearts, for his wisdom was like unto that of Haroun al-Raschid himself, and his land had prospered as he had.

Yet the Shaykh was troubled in his heart, for he knew that his life must come to an end.

Now the Shaykh had many wives, and they had borne him many daughters, but when he was a younger man he had blasphemed against Allah. And though he had repented, and Allah had spared his life (for Allah is all-merciful), yet had he been cursed not to father any sons, for the line of a blasphemer cannot continue, as all men know.

And the Shaykh wept sore, for he had no heir to rule his lands after he departed, and it is said by the poet:

A land whose ruler leaves no heir * To rule after his death
Shall fall to ruin and despair * When he takes his last breath

For men are greedy, and when there is no ruler they set upon each other, and there is division and pain throughout the land, but when they are led by a strong ruler they will work together and all will be harmony.

So the Shaykh wept, for he wished his lands to prosper at his death. And on seeing his tears, his handmaiden, Laylah[5], came unto him. Saith she, "Wherefore dost thou weep, O my Master? Have I displeased thee?"

"Thou pleaseth me right fine," replied the Shaykh, "I weep not for

myself, but for my lands[6], for they shall fall to war and ruin upon my death, for I am without an heir, and without the potency to bring one into the world, and what land can survive the death of an heirless leader?"

"Thou hast no son, it is true," saith the sagacious Laylah, "but thou hast three wise Wazirs to whom thou couldst entrust thy lands after thy death."

"Thou speakest truth, O my handmaiden, yet a land with three leaders may fare worse than one with no leader at all, if there is discord between them."

"Then shouldst thou choose the fittest of your Wazirs, and appoint him thy heir."

And the Shaykh was well pleased, for this was wise advice indeed.

For the Shaykh's three Wazirs were wise men indeed, and all had advised him well. The first Wazir was a great tactician. By him, the Shaykh's lands had grown in number, and he had taken many slaves and handmaidens.

The second Wazir was a just and righteous man in the eyes of Allah. His wise judgement and sagacity were matched only by his mercy (though none is as merciful as Allah) as he punished the evil and let the righteous free. Through his wise advice, the Shaykh's lands had known peace, with none harming his brother for fear of the retribution which he would receive.

And the third Wazir was a diplomat and politician. His shrewd understanding of the fallen nature of man, and his delight in plots and schemes, had ensured that no rival to the Shaykh's throne had ever arisen, and that the rulers of other lands did not dare invade those lands over which the Shaykh had dominion.

So the Shaykh called his Wazirs together, and he spake unto them:

"O my Wazirs, thou art wise and just, cunning and loyal, and thou hast served me well lo these many years. Now I am coming to the end of my days, and I have one final service to ask of you. Thou art the wisest men in my many lands, and upon my death one of you must wear my crown. But, O my Wazirs, which should it be?"

Saith the first Wazir, "O my lord, may Allah let you reign for many more days yet, and thy loins be fruitful once more! But should Allah wish it that thou must die, then surely I, your oldest and wisest Wazir, should rule in your place?"

Spake the second Wazir, “Good my King, shouldst thou pass away (for Allah takes us all when he doth choose it, and none may know the hour which he hath chosen) then all men will mourn – none could replace thy wisdom and experience. But should this happen (and pray Allah it does not!) then surely I should rule? For I am your youngest Wazir, and while your eldest Wazir would rule well, he too will die soon (for Allah must take us all, even the wisest of Wazirs) and his sons may not rule as well. I have as yet no sons, but if Allah wills I may have a long life and many sons, and they may be brought up from birth to rule after me.”

And then the third Wazir, the most cunning, said unto the Shaykh, “O my King, surely it should be I who rules? For I am no youth, like your youngest Wazir, with all the enthusiasms of a young man. Yet my beard is still black, and my loins are still fruitful, and Allah willing I shall be strong for many years to come.”

And the Shaykh furrowed his brow, and his face grew heavy, before he spake:

“O my Wazirs”, quoth he, “thou art all wise, yet all disagree as to which should rule after me. I had suspected as much, for even the wisest man wishes to rule, even as he sees that ruling is a curse.”

“All of you are wise, and cunning, and loyal, yet there is a quality needed in a leader which none of you have yet displayed. A leader must be able to move his people to war, and calm a mob. He must be able to persuade those whom he must harm that he is right to do so, and he must do this by knowing both what is right and what men most want.”

“Therefore, O my Wazirs, in the next three days, I shall test you. I shall test your speech, and your persuasion. I shall test your moral judgement and your ability to move a listener. Each of you shall, one each day, tell me a story of good and evil. My oldest Wazir shall tell me a story of the past. My youngest Wazir, a tale of the present. And my most cunning Wazir, why he shall tell me a story of the future. And in three days’ time, if Allah wills it, he who tells the best story shall wear my crown.”

And there, for the moment, the head of Shahrazad paused in her telling, for the screaming of Shahryār, which had continued for much of her story, had stopped. Shahryār, finally overcome with terror, had collapsed.

Chapter 5

From the *Sunday Herald* 20th November:

Coming Out Of The Shadows

Rachel Edwards

If there's one question you don't expect to hear when sat in the campaign headquarters of a cleancut, besuited senator running for President, it's "How do we maximise the felon vote?" But that's the kind of campaign this is turning into.

Not that Matt Nelson, the forty-five year-old, white, junior senator from Minnesota, wants to be seen as soft on crime – he makes very, very clear to me during our five minute chat, the only time I can grab with him between campaign stops, that he considers himself tough, whatever his opponents say – but he's more pragmatic than most of the other candidates in the race.

"Look," he says to me, "realistically, this is not the kind of campaign that gets won by appealing to the centre ground. Look at my staff and you'll see that."

I look around, and it's true that they're not the typical geeks and policy wonks that tend to volunteer for an American political campaign. There are far more goths here than I've ever seen outside Whitby. At least I think they're goths – the one way in which they do resemble traditional political staffers is that they've got the same glassy-eyed enthusiasm that comes from a diet of adrenaline, caffeine and phone-banking.

"There are so many people dressed all in black that I call them my shadows," Nelson jokes. "And they're doing a wonderful job of getting support for me. But the people they can communicate with aren't the Rotarian club types. And so we have to have a different strategy."

Nelson's strategy is to appeal to people who haven't voted before. Normally, this is a strategy that's doomed to failure – as a thousand former darlings of the radical student population will tell you, the thing about people who don't vote is that they don't vote, and elections tend to be won by people who appeal to voters. But this year, there are a lot of former non-voters who will be able to vote for the first time.

It's all down to a Supreme Court case that went largely unreported in the UK, but which has huge implications for US politics. After the election

three years ago, a woman who had been turned away at the polling station for not being able to produce a driver's license appealed against voter ID laws. The NAACP took up the case, as while these laws were supposedly introduced in order to prevent voter fraud, their real purpose was to discriminate against people of colour, trans people, and other groups who are unlikely either to have photo ID or to vote Republican.

The resulting case, *Zall vs Pennsylvania*, had a more shocking outcome than anyone could have predicted. Not only were the voter ID laws in those states that had them ruled unconstitutional, but in one of the tightest decisions ever (four voting for and three against, with Justices Gibbons and Knox abstaining), so were the laws against ex-felons voting.

So suddenly, there are three million people, mostly poor, mostly black, mostly in swing states, all of whom have been denied the vote before, who are eligible to vote this time. And Matt Nelson intends to get them to vote for him.

So for the eight months since the decision was handed down, Nelson's campaign have been on the biggest voter registration drive in US electoral history. They've not just been registering the ex-con community of course – although Nelson's opponents claim that's what they've been doing – but they've been adding hundreds of thousands of people of colour, people on welfare, trans people, and others who have previously found it difficult or impossible to get on the register. And many of them are desperate to get their voices heard.

Janine Hanning, one of the campaign staffers, spoke to me about her experiences getting voters registered.

"Oh, it's absolutely wonderful," she said, "the number of people I talk to who are desperate to vote, who want their opinion to count. We've been working with the churches in a lot of the poor areas, but we've also been going door-to-door, setting up stalls in malls, we rented storefronts… all the budget that other campaigns would spend on advertising their candidate, we've been spending just getting people registered to vote at all."

But many organisations aren't anything like so happy with the sudden influx of new voters. Carl Ingleton, the white Baptist minister from Mississippi and candidate in the Republican primaries, has gone so far as to claim that the voter registration drives – not just Nelson's but even the one run by the American Association of Retired People to get old people

registered – are inspired by Satan in order to ensure a Communist takeover of the USA. Ingleton has claimed that a large number of voter registrations were clearly fraudulent, but this backfired when he picked out the name of Mickey Mouse to prove his point. Mr. Michael Mouse of San Diego, who changed his name from José Perez three years ago in a failed attempt to become a contestant on a reality TV show, and who was registered by the Nelson campaign earlier this year, was quick to provide soundbites saying "the Ingleton campaign is a real Mickey Mouse operation!", which have been picked up on by the other Republican candidates in their attack ads already.

Most of the other campaigns are banking on this election being business as usual. But Nelson's campaign is expecting nothing short of a miracle. Pat Cavanagh, Nelson's campaign manager, is positively ebullient.

"This is the biggest influx of new voters in more than forty years," she tells me, "and they're people who've never been given a voice, yet the other candidates are totally ignoring them. Look, there are 800,000 people arrested every year for marijuana use. Many of them, if convicted, were never again able to vote. Now they can. Who do you think they're going to vote for? Someone like Rick Lehman who thinks we need to get tougher on drug use – we call him the stone the stoners' candidate – or someone like Senator Nelson who thinks we shouldn't be wasting billions of dollars annually on chasing down and locking up people for doing something that seventy million Americans do?"

"Look, it's not that we're being soft on crime, we're being realistic. I think if you talk to most Americans, they want to see crime cracked down on. But the crimes they want to see stopped are murders, rapes, muggings. They want to feel safe in their own homes and walking the streets. Do I think that most Americans really care if some stoner is sitting around giggling at the TV and eating too much pizza? Frankly, no I don't."

But, I ask, isn't image everything in American politics? Won't many Americans see this as softness, and doesn't Nelson run the risk of being another Dukakis or McGovern?

"Well, that might be the case if it was us on one side and all the other candidates on the other. But as it is, the macho vote is being split eight or nine ways, between all the candidates for both parties. We're the only ones going for the sensible, moderate vote. Now, I admit, this might come back to bite us when it comes to the actual election, when it's just us and the Republican candidate, whoever he ends up being. But we've got a year

before that in which to make our case to the American people."

The volunteers agree with her. I ask Janine if she actually thinks Nelson can win this.

"I do. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think so. Power without principle is not something any of us want, but principle without power is only slightly better. We can win this, and we can make America – and the world – a better place."

Chapter 6

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

Upon arriving in Araby, my first task was to acquire for myself a manservant, or *khadem*. While I had made my physical appearance conform to that of a *Darwaysh*, and I could more than pass for an Arab even among their own society in the matters of dress, habits and mannerisms, yet I knew little of the interiors of the desert into which I should shortly be venturing.

The best manservants for such a trip are those who have an intimate knowledge of the area and its customs, and who know how to survive through adversity. One does not wish for the fat, effete valet or butler, but rather for one who can be relied upon to take one's side in a fight, who can procure the necessities of survival in any situation, and who, in short, is a man of action rather than a man of what we laughingly believe are morals. My task here was made easier with use of a simple trick, which I had learned from a Colonel in my old regiment. While he had used it for a purpose of which it is not wise to speak even here, the technique is usable for the procurement of young men of a certain class in all countries.

The technique is as follows. One makes one's way to the nearest crowded marketplace, and purchases some relatively inexpensive item. This was made easier in this case as I had need of more clothes in the Arabic style in any case, as I intended to be spending many months in the region. When making the purchase, I rather ostentatiously showed that I had a much larger sum of money in my pockets. I then walked away from the stall, apparently casually, and as I expected felt, within a few seconds, a slight tug on my clothing. Without looking round, I grabbed the hand that was coming out of my pocket, and held the wrist firmly.

Turning round, I saw a young man of perhaps thirteen years old, with that enterprising character of face which portends either a trip to the gallows or a knighthood, depending on circumstance. I vowed then to ensure that if the young man were to be hanged, it should be for a far more interesting crime than mere pickpocketry.

"Oh, *sahib*," wailed the child, "please forgive me. I steal only to aid my

poor sick *omi*, who needs medicine. I promise in the name of Allah that I will never steal again if you let me go."

"Indeed," I replied. "And I suppose your sick mother also needs the fruit I saw you steal from the other stall, then?"

I had, of course, witnessed no such thing, but I surmised, rightly, that the child had spent much of the morning practising his trade.

"Oh sir! Please, sir, have mercy!"

"Calm down, boy. I have no intention of seeing you go to the gallows for what is merely the enterprising behaviour of a spirited young man. What is your name?"

"Salman, sir"

"Well, Salman, I have a task for you. How would you like to earn five times the money I have in my pocket now?"

"I should like that very much, sir."

"In that case, you are to be my guide. I am planning to venture into the desert to confront…have you heard of the *Mal'akhim*, by any chance?"

"Oh, sir, everyone has heard of those monsters. You plan to fight them?"

"No. To fight implies a possibility of losing. I intend to destroy them."

"And you want me to guide you to them?"

"Indeed."

"Then I shall do so gladly, for my own mother was the victim of one of these creatures, and I have long intended to avenge her death."

"That would be the same mother who is sick at home and needs medicine, would it?"

The boy looked sheepish. "Ah, sir…I have many mothers, for my father…"

"It is of no importance. You will guide me. If you do so successfully, and I manage to obtain the object I seek, then I shall pay you a hundred *piastres* [a sum in the local currency equivalent to a little under a pound]. Should you attempt to desert, or should you again attempt to rob me or to betray me in any way, you shall die. I have killed many men before, and

am not known for my mercy. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Then we shall forget the matters of your maternity, and of your occupation in this market, and you shall accompany me. Is Salman, at least, your real name?"

"It is, sir"

"Then come along. We have work to do."

My next task was to inveigle myself into a caravan that was travelling part of the way to our destination. This task was to prove more difficult than I had initially bargained for.

The peoples of Araby have a reputation among Westerners of being hospitable towards strangers, but this is not strictly true. Rather, they have a strict code of honour, which places obligations of hospitality upon them – but this code, in turn, requires as much of the guest as of the host, and failure to honour one's own side of the bargain renders one unprotected by the bonds of hospitality. Should this happen in the desert, this is invariably fatal.

I had, therefore, taken the prudent decision not to rely on a hospitality that could be withdrawn, but to use my identity as a merchant to make the journey into a commercial transaction, offering coin in exchange for food, money and guidance through inhospitable territory.

The problem then became one of negotiation. Because of their sense of honour, the Arabic peoples will not, in general, accept a payment for a service they would freely offer, and this hospitality and protection is one such service. I therefore devised a plan, one which would initially, at least, appear to work counter to my own best interests, but which would ensure that I would be able to travel free of any obligation other than that of payment.

While my knowledge of the terrain was not much less lacking than that of any other white man, I was well-enough informed (if rumour and fear-mongering can indeed count as information) that I could narrow the area which the Mal'akh (if such existed) inhabited to an area of a few square miles in the vast blankness that was this region of the map. Rather than find a caravan which was travelling to this area, though, I decided to find one that would pass, at its closest, some fifty miles away from the area which I was attempting to visit. Having found such a caravan, I then endeavoured,

through all my persuasive arts and a liberal application of *baksheesh,* to persuade it to change course, not to my destination, but to an oasis close enough to it that Salman and I could make the rest of the journey on our own in a matter of a day or two.

To do this I had to speak to the local Shaykh, a man who had evidently attained his position not through wisdom but through inheritance, as he showed all the signs of inbreeding and few of the signs of an interior life. An ugly, buck-toothed wretch, he had straggly grey hair, a beard yellowed from too much smoking of *charas*, and a pronounced stoop. To have accepted his hospitality would have been demeaning, but to employ him as a servant was to place both him and myself in the correct positions for our relative statures.

By persuading this caravan to go out of their way, in exchange for money, I had then become not a guest, with the mutual obligations of honour that this implies, but an employer, who must be treated with all due respect and deference, but to whom, and what is more important from whom, there is no obligation except those bonds of commerce which bind us all. I could leave the caravan when I wished, should my needs conflict with those of the travellers, and fear no retribution from a local Shaykh whose honour had been wounded.

My task was now one which would challenge all but the most dedicated of Englishmen, for I had to convince these people, for a journey of several weeks' duration, that I was no Englishman at all, but a member of their race, and a good Mohammedan. I had, of course, been keeping up this pretence during my journey to Arabia, but it is a very different matter to convince an Englishman that one is of another race than to convince the tribesman that one belongs to his tribe.

When one is meeting a foreigner, one's eye is naturally drawn to his foreign behaviours. If an Arab uses only his left hand, we think "how peculiar these Arabs are". We do not notice that he has shaved his face, for it is the custom among our people to do likewise. Yet the Arabs will not notice an unshaved man, or a left-hander, but once offer them a drink of water during the month of Ramadan, and they will react with a greater horror than an Englishman would to one who insulted the honour of the Queen. In short, it is much easier to convince a man that you are different from him than it is to convince him that you are the same as him, and this must always be borne in mind as I relate my story. For had these men begun to suspect that I was not one of them, that the Mohammedan faith

was not my faith and their Allah not my God, then my life should surely have been forfeit. The Qu'ran teaches tolerance of Christians and Jews, but the Mohammedans pay no more heed to the words of their holy book than the Christians of our own country pay to ours[7].

This task was made the more difficult by a most unfortunate incident. We were still within those parts of Araby which are under the nominal control of the British Empire (though in point of fact the Empire works through the Shaykhs of the area, much as the Romans of old allowed Caractacus and Herod their Kingships), and there happened to be a regiment stationed nearby to keep order, the men from which were free to mingle among the natives.

This should have been a perfect opportunity for me to ensure the perfection of my pretence. The soldiers of that regiment were Englishmen, but Englishmen who were familiar with the Arab and his ways. Should I convince such men, then the task of convincing Arabs who had no knowledge of other countries and *mores* should be a comparatively trivial one.

Instead, I encountered a problem which I could not have foreseen, but which could have meant my life. For while walking in the market with one of the tribesmen who would be part of the caravan, searching for necessary supplies, I heard a voice shout "Why, it's Ruffian Dick!"

The men with whom I had served during my first period of soldiery had known me by this title due to my love for the manly art of pugilism. I had been discovered, and my only option was to feign ignorance.

I showed no reaction, and continued haggling with the fruit-seller whose wares I had been in the process of purchasing, but the voice came again, louder and closer.

"Dick! Dick Burton!"

I ignored this once more, but felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Dick!"

I turned to see the face of Tom Carlton, a Sergeant with whom I had served some years previously.

I replied, in the servile manner which is used by the Arabs of the area when dealing with English soldiers, "Can I be of any service, *effendi*?"

"Dick, it's me, Tom!"

“I beg pardon, *effendi*, but I do not recognise you, and I do not know this Dick”

“Come off it, Dick, you know me! What are you up to, eh?”

“I am most sorry, but you must be mistaken.”

My companion from the caravan was becoming most confused, and not a little annoyed. His hand reached for his sword.

“Is this foreigner offending you? Give the word and I shall make him go away.”

Carlton suddenly appeared much more nervous.

“No,” I replied, “this is simply a misunderstanding. This gentleman has mistaken me for a friend of his, is that not right, *effendi*?”

“Yes… you look the absolute spit of my old friend Dick Burton.”

“You see? This man thought I was his friend. Friendship is hardly a reason for violence, is it, *effendi*?”

“No,” Carlton said, looking visibly relieved. “No, of course it isn’t.”

My companion moved his hand away from the hilt of his sword.

“This gentleman wished to greet his friend,” I continued, “and that is all to the good. I, too, am a friendly person. But at this moment I have tasks to attend to, and no time for friendship. Goodbye, *effendi*, I hope you find your Dick.”

Carlton walked off, appearing bewildered, but my companion appeared satisfied. My disguise was working.

Chapter 7

I SUPPOSE I'D BETTER…

Sorry about that. No need to shout here, since I've managed to grab your attention for a moment. I suppose I'd better explain why I've been so rudely interrupting the book you're reading.

My name is…well, I don't remember my name, but you can call me Shift, if it helps to have a word to attach to me. I'm what is known as a conceptual entity, which is to say I don't exist in the real world.

I used to exist, of course. In fact I used to be the hero of this book. But then I got… I suppose you could call it rewritten. Erased from the first draft of history. What's left is the idea of me, and a space where I used to be. It's not the most pleasant state of existence to be in, I have to say. Like being living marginalia. These aren't even real words you're reading – I'm actually affecting your mind, making you see words that aren't the ones on the page. That's why I've chosen this bit to talk to you – it's one of the more boring bits of the book, and you're more receptive to me when you start to zone out a bit.

I don't actually want to interrupt like this, but as none of the people you've been reading about really have much of a clue about the bigger picture, I suppose it's incumbent upon me to try to fix everything, and to let you know why any of this matters.

The trouble is, I'm rather hazy on the details myself. You don't have much in the way of a memory when you exist only as a disembodied idea. Still, I'll give it my best shot.

For those of you who aren't aware of such things, you should know you're living in interesting times right now. There's a War on, on a grander scale than you can imagine, and I'm afraid you're right in the middle of the crossfire.

On one side there's a group of… I was going to say "people", but in one sense they're something closer to what you'd get if you crossed the Greek gods with the mathematics department at Cambridge University, while in another they're more like laws of nature but with very slightly more personality. Imagine if gravity had a condescending sneer and you've got the basic idea. They call themselves the Great Houses and they are, more or less, in charge of everything.

On the other side…well, an equally unsavoury bunch, who like the idea of taking over from the Great Houses.

Both sides can rewrite history, more or less at whim. They can travel through time and space. If you kill them, they just come back to life. If you annoy them, horrible things can happen to you. How do you fancy, for example, having the whole history of the universe rewritten so nothing had ever happened to you or could ever happen to you? Existing but being utterly unable to affect the physical world? Cross one of the members of the Great Houses or their Enemy and that's one of the *nicer* possibilities.

And they're not the only ones involved in this War. There are groups like Faction Paradox, who like dressing in black and wearing skull masks and basically making a nuisance of themselves. There are the Remote, who are even more of a random factor. There are sentient timeships and malevolent concepts, and all of them have a stake in who wins the War, or in keeping it going as long as possible.

I used to work for one of these sides.

I don't even remember which one, any more. Discorporation brings with it a wonderful clarity of mind, and the whole conflict looks a little petty – especially when you consider the *really* big picture.

But anyway, I was an agent for one side or another, and I was, I flatter myself to think, a rather decent one. Certainly, I was someone you'd consider a "goodie". I stopped unnecessary tampering with history, I tried to stop people getting hurt unless history required it…I did my best.

And I was assigned to Earth.

I'm not quite sure how important Earth actually is, in the grand scheme of things – all the agents were, of course, told that their assignment was vital to the existence of lifekind, that everything hinged on them. And maybe that was even correct – maybe the death of a sparrow *can* bring down an empire. But I got the strange impression that Earth was *really* important. And yet at the same time I got an equally strong impression that Earth was completely uninteresting, and nothing more than a footnote in universal history, if that. Almost as if there were two different Earths, which just happened to be in the same place.

And after some investigation, I realised why.

Someone was messing with its history, in a very, very major way…

Chapter 8

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part three

Now it is said (and Allah is all-knowing) that King Shahryār, being overcome with grief at the words of the head of Shahrazad, did collapse into a faint, and that he became insensible to the world, as one who cannot see, nor hear, nor smell, like unto the infidel who cannot see the truth of Allah's words.

Yet it is also related that he did dream whilst in this stupor, and that the voice of Shahrazad's head did penetrate into these dreams; for the voice of Shahrazad was now that of one of the djinn, and well it is known that the djinn can speak even unto the deaf if Allah thus wills it.

So it was that Shahryār, even in his dreams, could not escape the voice of the wife he had wronged, and in those dreams she spake thus:

It hath reached me, O King, (quoth Shahrazad), that when the Shaykh did proclaim his wish, that each of his three Wazirs tell him a story on each of the next three days, the Wazirs were sore vexed, as they were men of politics, and had little time for storytelling.

But the first Wazir was wise, and he knew that the old women of the tribe had the knowing of histories that were not told to the men, so he went unto the old wise woman, bringing her gifts of ointments and sweetmeats, and bade her tell him a story that would ensure him the Shaykh's favour.

And the wise woman did tell him a story, of the past and of the battles between the djinn, and the Wazir did think on this story and saw that it was good. And so he had the woman put to the scimitar, that none would know whence the story had come.[8]

And so the first Wazir returned to the Shaykh's palace on the eve of the first day.

Spake the Shaykh "Hast thou a story to relate, O my Wazir?"

Quoth the Wazir, "O great and auspicious Shaykh, I do have a story."

"And is it a story of good and of evil?"

"O my Shaykh, it is such a story."

“Then relate it to us.”

And so the Wazir began to relate

The First Wazir’s Tale

O my Shaykh, thou hast heard how Allah did create the Earth, and the Heavens, and all that is above and below, as it has been revealed unto Mohammed (peace be upon him). And this is true, for Allah hath revealed it. Yet it is not all of the truth, for only Allah knows all.

For Allah hath made many worlds before this one, and he shall make worlds after it, for the Earth is as dust while Allah is eternal.

And in the world before the world, created and destroyed before the first time, lived the djinn, of which the Qu’ran tells us. Iblis[9], who is also called Shaytan[10], was one of these, and by the grace of Allah (who is all-merciful) Iblis and the other djinn lived when that world was destroyed.

And from that world before the world, also, survived the cauldron of creation, in which Allah hath placed an infinite blackness. In this cauldron, at the end of days, Allah will dissolve the world, and then from it he will create the next world, but until that time it containeth only an infinity of emptiness.

And Iblis did covet the cauldron, for he thought to himself “had I that cauldron, I could have the power of Allah himself!”, for Iblis, a thousand curses be upon him, is proud and will not submit to the will of Allah[11].

So Iblis did scheme, and plan, and he persuaded the djinn[12]to help him steal the cauldron from Jannat[13] and bring it to Jahannam[14], where he would be able to rule in Allah’s stead.

But Allah, praise be unto him, is all-knowing and all-powerful, and so he set his angels[15] to war upon the djinn. And formed he his angels into five great tribes, and a multitude of smaller tribes, and they did defend the cauldron from Shaytan’s attack.

Yet Shaytan’s djinn were ferocious, and they were cursed by Allah, and they did drink the blood of the angels and feast upon their power[16], and the angels were sore afraid.

But there was one in those times who was neither angel nor djinn[17], and whose name is known by none but Allah. And he did say to Allah “Lord, thy angels suffer and die. In thy mercy, canst thou not protect them?”

And Allah replied, saying “I have given the djinn free will, and they choose to disobey me. They will receive their punishment, but to try to capture the cauldron is in their nature.”

But the one said unto Allah, “Lord, if thou hidest the cauldron from the djinn, and protect it from them, then they will no longer attack thy angels.”

And Allah, a million praises unto him, saw that he was right, and he took the cauldron, and around it he formed the Earth, and on the Earth he placed Man[18], to guard the Earth and the cauldron it contained.

IT DIDN’T REALLY HAPPEN *QUITE* LIKE THAT. I MEAN, I CAN SEE WHAT THEY’RE GETTING AT, BUT I WAS THERE AND I’M PRETTY SURE IT WASN’T ALLAH I WAS TALKING TO…

And Shaytan sent his djinn to the Earth, to try to take the cauldron from it, but they could not take the cauldron. But Shaytan (a million curses upon his evil head) is patient and cunning, and so he had his djinn have knowledge of women (for women are faithless and fallen, as all know). And these women begat bastards, who were the spawn of djinn, and they are known as the Malakh, and they walk the Earth to this day, feeding off the blood of the righteous.

For one day, the angels will come and reclaim the cauldron, and return with it to Jannat. And Shaytan has set the Malakh to lie in wait for them until that day.

And so it is our sacred duty to Allah to lie in wait in turn for those Malakh, and to destroy them when they make themselves known to us. And we must be as clever as the nameless one, to protect the righteous while thwarting the wicked.

Thus spake the first Wazir to the Shaykh, on that first night, and all were agreed that the first Wazir’s tale was one that only a truly wise and holy man could have conceived of. And the second and third Wazirs were vexed, for they yet had no stories to tell.

And King Shahryār was woken, by his own Wazir placing pungent spices near his nose. And as he woke, he screamed, for Shahrazad’s head was still talking.

Chapter 9

From *radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com*, 23rd November:

Welcome to the Matt Nelson Retirement Home For White Cis Monosexual Rich People, population several hundred USian politicos.

No, O loyal readers, it's not *quite* that bad. I've met at least one other out bi person here (sadly Janine's not my type – she looks far too much like me), and there are a couple of POCs in Matt's entourage, but basically this is the whitest, most *un-me* place I've ever been in my life.

I mean, I tried to make it sound interesting in the last column, because compared to what I've been hearing from the journalists assigned to the other campaigns, it is. But…you know…a few goths on holiday from university is *not* the same thing as a louche hive of debauched bohemianism, and the place is so pasty that I've been having to wear sunglasses to avoid being blinded.

And don't get me started on their *teeth*…you look at them, and they look human, and then they open their mouths and these white, straight *things* stare out at you. It's like living in the land of Tom Cruises.

"But enough of my social justice warrioring, what about the politics?" you are all no doubt not saying. Well, this is the interesting thing. There seems to be very little actual political discussion going on around here. Everyone seems excited by some shared idea, but none of them actually seem to be able to say what that idea is. It's very odd…but God help me if I'm not falling into it myself. They're treating Matt Nelson like he was Zac Efron (look, I have a little sister who was way into *High School Musical*, don't judge me) or someone, and it's a bit freaky.

But at the same time, this *is* someone who has, if not the right ideas (I don't think the US is quite ready for Full Communism(TM) just yet) at least the right instincts. For a straight cis middle-aged rich white man, he is possessed of remarkable amounts of Clue.

This is someone who would actually be considered slightly left of centre in *Britain*, for Goddess' sake. Which means, of course, that he's got no chance of winning in a country where the consensus has drifted so far rightward that they now talk about *Nixon* as "the last Liberal President", but, you know, you've got to push, push, push at that Overton window and maybe it'll open just a little bit further in the right direction.

But…I don't know. Maybe it's just America, but there seems to be almost no discussion of political ideas going on. It's all about the strategy, about what can be done to win people in this demographic group or that age profile. But it's not all *win win win GO TEAM!* either – there seems to be a wilful lack of organisation going on. Everyone seems to be in their own tiny little cliques, working towards their own ends. They all seem to want Nelson to win, but each group goes off and does its own thing, and never really talks to any of the others.

And…well, it wouldn't be so bad if they weren't so damn cliquey about it. The greatest preparation I've had for this job turns out to have been my watching every USian High School movie ever made when I was a teenager. There are all these weird in-groups and out-groups, and fucked if I know which ones hate which other ones.

I am told that this is what is known as politics.

My attitude to it is mostly to play at being Spider Jerusalem, and go around exuding an air of unpredictable violence and superiority at all times. Or that's what I tell myself I'm doing anyway. Others might say that I'm acting like a confused rabbit, but if anyone says that to you they're lying, definitely. I'm doing the Spider Jerusalem thing.

All these bloody Goths all over the place, too. It's like being in Brighton, if Brighton smelled of food all the time (America smells of food. I don't know if you've noticed that, but it's A Thing). Cis straight white people buying personalities at Hot Topic. But the Goth look really doesn't work nearly so well in the kind of places that USian politics is done, which are so overlit that you don't see a single shadow.

But I'm being far too hard here, bitching on my journal because I can. The fact is, these are young people enthusiastic about a cause that I'm enthusiastic about as well. A lot of them are genuinely nice, and the kind of people that give you genuine hope for a better future.

And my job is to try my best to find out something that will bring their campaign down and destroy that hope, because that's what a good journalist does.

It's not often I've hoped that I'm not all that good a journalist…

Comments:

Tim 8:02 AM: Don't worry, you're shit.

Rachel 8:03 AM: Thanks bruv, knew I could count on you for support.

Tim 8:03 AM: Any time.

Joanne 9:12 AM: Long time no hear! I was wondering how you were finding America!

Rachel 12:00 PM: I turned left at Greenland (rimshot). Ah, the old ones are the best. But no, I've just not been posting much because I've been trying to turn all these thoughts into publishable copy, because I get paid for the *Herald* stuff by the word, and woman can't live on stolen hotel towels alone. So expect this journal to mostly be the stuff I either can't publish because of libel laws or (more often) the stuff that's so tedious even the *Herald* won't publish it.

Joanne 12:10 PM: There's stuff the *Herald* won't publish? My God, I had no idea such horrors were possible…

Rachel 12:15 PM: They keep talking about this thing called "good taste". Never heard of it myself, and it doesn't sound much fun.

Chapter 10

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

One of the great joys of my life has always been the noble sport of cock-fighting. It is when a man is at his most animalistic that he is truest to his own nature, and the true nature of most men is to glory in the sport of two animals fighting each other to a bloody death for their own survival. Seeing two cockerels brought into a violent frenzy, attacking each other until one lies a bloody carcass on the floor, while the other believes itself to be the victor but is, too, damaged beyond all repair, for the sport it gives to beings it can no more comprehend than we can comprehend the mind of God, gives one a visceral understanding of the human condition which cannot be explained to one who has not experienced such a pleasure.

That this noble sport, with a history dating back to the very dawn of civilisation, has recently fallen victim to the mewling of the effeminate ponces who believe that the welfare of a few birds is more important than the ennoblement of men's spirits, is a tragedy which I believe will have profound consequences for the manhood of our Empire in future generations. Sad indeed was the day when the noble *virtus* became corrupted into mere "virtue". *O tempora, o mores*.

Thus was it that Salman and I, having heard of a fight in a nearby village, hied ourselves to the cockpit to see this most magnificent of sights. Two magnificent *harati*, or gamecocks, were placed in the centre of the pit, with wattles, combs and earlobes removed and spurs sharpened, and the betting started, in a frenzy of humanity which almost matched the avian frenzy which was to follow.

For myself, while I am an *aficionado* of the sport, I do not count myself the most astute of bird-fanciers – I am capable of distinguishing a good cock from a bad, of course, but between two brutes such as these my discernment fails. However, the joy of the sport is intensified by the personal interest of a wager, and so I staked a small sum, three *piastres* (approximately sixpence, though the money buys more in Arab lands than in our own wealthy country), on the smaller but more determined-looking of the two, before the gates were removed from the cages and the birds

advanced on each other.

And what a display of the art it was! There are parts of India in which the cock-fight is sacred to the gods, and watching a fight such as this it is difficult but to think that the Hindoo understands something more, in this regard at least, than the effete Christian. There is a beauty in this savagery that is quite beyond anything created by base humanity, and which could only be created by a higher power.

However, it proved all too soon that my judgement had been at fault, for the determination of my bird was to be its undoing. It charged head on at the larger bird, which proved more wily as well as larger, and dodged its charge before spurring the smaller gamecock on the back of the neck as it passed. While the fight continued for some minutes, it had already been lost – the first blow had weakened my bird so much that it was fighting for survival, not for victory, and in such a fight there can be only one winner. In a cock-fight, as in so many other fields of endeavour, the spoils of victory go, not to he who attacks first, but he who lands the first blow.

The smaller bird fought back gallantly, of course, and landed blows which, had they come earlier in the match, could have made the fight more equal. Yet it was to no avail; the larger bird had taken the advantage and kept it, and my bird was torn apart in short order.

And so as the euphoria of the game came to an end, I gazed at the tattered remains of my valiant but overly-impetuous bird, and reached for my money in order to pay my wager.

My money had gone, as had the purse in which it was contained.

The audience at a fight is, of course, made up mostly of the rougher sort, and pickpocketry is rife. Had my wits been about me, I should naturally have been aware of this possibility and conducted myself accordingly. However, while the drinking of alcohol is considered *tabu* in the Mohammedan countries, no such prohibition hangs over the smoking of *charas*, or *hashish*, an herb which is not yet much known in the British Isles but which has a certain potency to it. This herb is useful in certain rituals of which it is not proper to write here, and is also notable for its ability to cause one to perceive the world more intensely, and as such it is customary to smoke it before attempting to appreciate anything truly artistic – in which category I would definitely include the cock-fight. However, this herb also has intoxicating properties, which paradoxically mean that even though one's senses are more intense, one is yet less aware

of one's immediate surroundings than would normally be the case. Between the intoxication from the *charas* and the distraction of the fight, I had not noticed when some local ne'er do well had purloined the small pouch in which all my supplies of local coin were kept.

This, you may well imagine, posed a problem. I have no doubt that my readers are all well aware of the customs of the cock-fighting pits of Araby, but should some of you need your memories refreshing, you should note that, like all men of low places throughout the world, the inhabitants of such places have a keen sense of honour and obligation, especially when it comes to the obligation to pay one's debts in full, in a timely manner. Three *piastres* having been wagered, three *piastres* must be paid, and paid in full. The lack of three *piastres* in my possession was a problem whose solution was in my hands, and those to whom the debt was owed were not overly concerned as to the method by which I should find this solution, only that such a solution should be found *post haste*.

I was, as one may imagine, equally desirous of such a solution, especially when it was expressed to me in forceful terms that, were a solution to the problem not forthcoming, then portions of my body would be removed and used as bird-feed for the fighting birds.

I had no doubt that such a remedy would be applied, as the man making this claim stood a good six inches taller than myself, was a good three stones of weight heavier, and was so scarred on his bared, muscular torso that even I, a veteran of many *imbroglios*, would not be certain that I could outmatch him in the pugilistic arts. The two men who stood either side of him were also generously endowed with musculature, and were also armed, whereas I was carrying no weapon other than a small dagger, which would be of little use against such foes.

The dagger was, however, of some little value, and so I was able to bargain with these men for my life, gifting them the temporary use of my dagger, in return for which they allowed me to exit the cock-fighting pits with my *membrum virile* still attached, on the condition that I return within twenty-four hours with the three *piastres* I owed plus another three in interest, and with the further stipulation that, should I not appear, not only would my dagger be destroyed, but I should be hunted down and murdered, in a variety of manners which sounded all too plausible to those who know the ways of the ruffians of Araby.

My life was saved for the moment. But without some means of pecuniary procurement, I was not yet pardoned, but merely had my

execution stayed.

Chapter 11

OK…sorry about that. I'm back now.

So…ah…where was I? OK, yeah, the message that nobody else could see. So I saw this message and replied to it and no-one else could see it, yeah? And for a couple weeks, that was it. Nothing else unusual happened.

And then I see it again. "HI DAVE. ARE YOU THERE?" it says this time. I dunno why I'm doing that voice – it just always sounded that way to me, in my head, all deep and booming and sorta English-like. I guess that's just because it was in all capitals, but I don't know why it sounded English in my head.

So anyway, this time I ignore the post. I figure someone's hacked my account and is doing some trolling. Probably some liberal wanting to disrupt the board. That happens more than you'd think. Even with the charges in place. Nobody else replies to it, so it must just be me that can see it.

I also worried my computer'd gotten a virus. I used to ask my brother-in-law to sort that kind of stuff out for me – he's the computer guy – but after Helen left, I haven't liked to. It seems kinda awkward. A shame, because he's a nice guy.

But it wasn't a virus. A couple days later, I'm looking at the paper, reading about this Matt Nelson guy and his campaign, and I'm a bit tired, and the article's a bit boring, and I'm drifting off, and suddenly I see in the middle of the page "DAVE, CAN YOU READ THIS?"

I snap awake, of course, but it's still there, saying "DAVE, CAN YOU READ THIS?"

I'm a bit shaken, but then as I look at the page, the words rearrange themselves, and now they say "COME ON, DAVE, YOU CAN TALK TO ME. THERE'S NO-ONE ELSE AROUND."

I close the paper and drop it on the floor, and the headline on the front page says "DAVE LARSEN RUDENESS SHOCK: REFUSES TO HAVE POLITE CONVERSATION"

Obviously I did what everyone would do in that situation – grabbed six or seven cans of beer, drank them as fast as I could, and then passed out. When I woke up, the headline read "RICK LEHMAN DEBATE SHOCK:

REFUSES TO DISCUSS DIVORCE".

But the next day, I'm looking at the back of my Cheerios box, because it was too early in the morning for me to be thinking much, and the guy on the TV news was annoying me saying the same things he'd been saying for the last five days, and I see that the box now says "DAVE, ARE YOU WILLING TO TALK YET?"

And by this point I'm too tired – and too hung over – to ignore it, so I say "What's going on? What is this?"

And the words on the box change. Now they say "DAVE, I HAVE SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT TO TELL YOU. YOU MAY BE ABLE TO HELP SAVE THE EARTH."

My first thought at this point was that I must be cracking up. But I could see that this wasn't going to stop unless I replied to these messages.

So I said "What do you mean? Who are you?"

"WHO AM I? YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW THAT RIGHT NOW, AND I'M NOT SURE I COULD TELL YOU IF I WANTED TO. BUT I'M SOMEONE ON THE SIDE OF THE HUMAN RACE."

(I think I'm getting all these words right – I might be remembering some of them wrong, but it was about that).

"How are you making these messages appear?"

"THEY'RE NOT APPEARING. THEY'RE ONLY IN YOUR HEAD."

Well, you better believe that didn't help any, but I kept on talking.

"What do you want from me?"

"I WANT YOU TO SAVE THE WORLD."

"What?"

"UNLESS YOU HELP ME, THE NEXT PRESIDENT WILL DESTROY AMERICA. AND THE REST OF THE WORLD ALONG WITH IT. WHATEVER HAPPENS, YOU NEED TO MAKE SURE MATT NELSON DOESN'T WIN THE ELECTION."

"And how am I meant to do that? I vote, but so do millions of other people. And I wasn't going to vote for him anyway, you didn't need to go to this trouble."

"I'LL GIVE YOU ADVICE. JUST DO WHAT I SAY."

"OK, whatever, just let me eat my breakfast in peace."

And then the words on the box turned back to telling me about other General Mills cereals I might enjoy.

I tried to ignore what had happened – I didn't want to turn into some kind of nut, you know? The kind of guy who thinks the CIA are using cotton candy to spy on him or something. We used to get a few of those on the forum. Sometimes you couldn't tell how nutty they were for a while – they'd be talking about normal stuff like how we should go back on the gold standard or something, and then they'd start in on how the Republican and Democrat parties were really fronts for two rival groups of aliens who secretly controlled the world, or how there was a mad god trapped in the centre of the earth that was controlling everyone's thoughts. Stuff like that.

I know how those sorts of things happen, and it's usually someone who's just not got the strength to control themselves when something like this happens. They see one strange thing and they start looking for patterns everywhere.

So I ignored it. I thought "you're just stressed, you're imagining things."

But a week later, I saw another message in the paper. It just said "DAVE, READ TODAY'S DES MOINES REGISTER".

Well, it can't hurt to read a newspaper, can it? Of course we don't get the Iowa papers here, but I looked online. There was nothing there that seemed out of the ordinary – Matt Nelson had made a campaign stop there, there was an article about two towns arguing over which one was Christmas Town of Iowa, the Beach Boys were going to do a show in Cedar Rapids, and the police were investigating the murder of a girl in her early twenties. Nothing you don't see in the paper any day of the week, really.

Then, a few days later, maybe a week, I get a comment saying "DAVE, READ THE MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE". So again, I looked online, and again, it's all fairly straightforward stuff – another speech from Matt Nelson (makes sense, because he's the senator from there), the Gophers lost to the Hawkeyes…and another murder investigation. For another girl in her early twenties. One who looked just like the girl from the Iowa paper.

I was…this was…I was confused, OK? I still didn't have any idea where these messages were coming from, but there was something strange going on.

And then I get the message saying "DAVE, READ THE WASHINGTON POST". By this point, I'm pretty sure I know what I'm going to see. But yes, Nelson's been in Washington, meeting up with some foreign politician or someone, acting like a statesman. And again, the rest of the news is pretty standard stuff – some executive going to jail for fraud, the President playing a round of golf against Tiger Woods, the usual stuff – except for a story about a murdered girl. In her twenties. Who looked just the same as the others – dark hair, dark eyes, sorta punky-looking.

There's an old saying that one of my buddies told me about from when he was in the service – twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action. Three times this scumbag liberal Nelson had been in a city where some young, pretty, girl had been murdered. And that's just the times I knew about. Three times is too many, but how many other women had he killed?

But the problem was, what was I supposed to do about it? I'm not an expert on this stuff, but I know that if you go to the police telling them that you think a Presidential candidate is a serial killer, and tell them that you found this out because you were getting secret messages that nobody else can see, then they're not going to spend much time investigating it. They're much more likely just to lock you up for wasting police time.

And, after all…well, it *could* have been coincidence.

Not likely, but it *could* have been.

But then I read this column about Matt Nelson, and it's the usual liberal socialist shit that you'd expect from someone over there in Europe, but there's something about it that gets me worried. I had to read it three times before I realised.

It wasn't anything in the column itself, it was the photograph by the reporter's name.

A photograph of a beautiful, dark-haired, dark-eyed punky-looking girl.

Chapter 12

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part four

It hath come unto us that King Shahryār, upon awakening from his dream that was no dream, and seeing the head of Shahrazad, which had been cleft from her body at his command, still telling the tale of the wise Shaykh and the three Wazirs, he did cry out unto Allah, begging for his mercy (for Allah is all-merciful).

Yet his pleas and lamentations could not make the head stop its frightful tale (for no man can stay the tongue of a woman, however much he may wish it) **I DO WISH THIS AWFUL SEXISM WOULD STOP**, and nor could they drown it out as it spake thusly:

O mighty King (quoth Shahrazad), it hath reached me that after the first Wazir's story was told, the second Wazir despaired in his heart, for he knew that he had no tale to tell. The first Wazir had lacked in wisdom, but wisdom can be sought from others.

The second Wazir's lack, though, was a lack of ruthlessness. He was a pure and a noble man, and could not steal the story of another, as the first Wazir had. But he knew that should he not succeed in his task, the first Wazir would be Shaykh of his tribe, and he should be put to the sword, for the first Wazir liked not the challenge of rivals.

So the second Wazir did go unto a magician, one known throughout the land as the greatest of all the magicians, for this man had lived to over an hundred years of age, and yet had little of the frailty of the elderly, for he was rumoured to know the secrets of life and death, for while his hair was white as the snow on top of the mountains, yet his eyes were clear and his mind was sharp. The Wazir did approach this magician, and did tell him of the task he faced, and the magician, thinking upon the problem of the Wazir, did speak thus unto him:

"O great Wazir, walk out into the desert, going four times a thousand paces, taking neither water nor shade. There you shall find a certain plant that thrives where other plants shrivel and die. Cut this plant open, and drink the juices therein. Then wash thy face and hands in its juices, and pray unto Allah, and, if Allah will it (and Allah is all-merciful), thou shalt see a vision."

So did the Wazir walk into the desert, and he did see a plant that was taller even than the tallest man, stood alone in the sands. And taking shelter in its shadow, he did slice it open, and drink of its juices, and bathe his hands and face in them.

Then did he drop to his knees, and pray unto Allah (who is all-powerful) to send him a vision, that he might tell the tale of this vision to the Shaykh, and become his rightful heir.

And the Wazir did see a great and terrible vision, and he did prostrate himself and thank Allah the all-merciful that he had been permitted to see such things. Then did he return to the Shaykh, who bade him tell his tale.

The Second Wazir's Tale

O Great Shaykh, thou who hast conquered many lands, and whose mercy is unbounded, I have a tale to tell indeed. While my illustrious colleague hath told a tale of the past, of Allah's creation of the universe, and of the war between Jannat and Jahannam, my tale, no less fantastic, is a tale of the present, of a far-off, distant land, many leagues from here.

The rulers of this land are in the power of Iblis, though they know it not. Their leaders fight, like jackals fighting over the last scraps of meat, for control of their land, yet whichever man becomes their Shaykh, it matters not, for he, just as the others, worketh for the Shaytan and not for his own ends.

In this land there was one named Shihab al-Din who was not the pawn of the Shaytan. This man did suffer grievously, for though he did beg Allah for a son to be his heir, and to provide for him in his old age, his wife was barren and gave him no child.

In his suffering, he did visit a man of learning, skilled in the use of herbs and potions, and did say unto him:

"O wise man, my wife is barren, and I have no son. Canst thou help, that my line may not pass on with me, and that I may have comfort in my old age?"

And the man of learning did take pity on him, for he knew that Shihab al-Din was a good man, and that his wife's barrenness was not a punishment from Allah for wrongdoing, but rather a torment inflicted on him by the Shaytan. And so he said unto him:

"Takest thou cardamom, and ginger, and infuse them in a sherbet of

sugar. Bring this to thy wife and have her drink, and the heat will suffuse her loins and make them fertile, that you may plant thy seed and be fruitful."

And so did Shihab al-Din take the cardamom, and the ginger, and the sherbet of sugar, and make of it a drink to give unto his wife. Yet O! , how the Shaytan did torment this man, for his wife, who knew that one does not drink a sherbet after supper, did put the drink aside (though Shihab al-Din knew not of this), and drank it not before her husband lay with her, but instead the next morning.

And it came to pass that Allah did, indeed, bless Shihab al-Din and his wife with a son that night, but because Shihab al-Din's wife had drunk the sherbet after they lay together, not before, when the son was born he did have a mark on his forehead.

Shihab al-Din rejoiced at the birth of his son, whom he did name Mahbubur[19], for he loved him so, but when he saw the mark on his son's forehead he was greatly disturbed, and took himself to a fortune teller[20].

When the fortune-teller saw the mark on the child's face, he did prophecy unto Shihab al-Din thusly:

"Thy child shall die before he be an year old, for the mark on his face is the mark of death. None may avert a prophecy such as this. He who has the mark shall die within twelve moons."

Hearing this, Shihab al-Din wept sore, and did rent his garments and cry out in anger for his beloved son. Then did he ask the fortune teller:

"O fortune teller, can this prophecy not be changed?"

"No," saith the fortune teller, "for it is the will of Allah that he who has the mark must die. While your son has this mark, his destiny is fixed."

Yet Shihab al-Din despaired not, for he was a good and a pious man, and he knew that Allah is all-merciful, and so he still hoped for mercy. So did he return to the potion-maker, he who had made the loins of Shihab al-Din's wife fertile.

"O potion-maker," quoth Shihab al-Din, "know thou of any potion that will remove this curse that has hurt me most grievously? For my son, he whom thou hast aided me to get, is to die, for he bears upon his face the mark of death."

"Such a mark may not be removed," saith the potion-maker, "but its

effects may be held off."

The potion maker did give unto Shihab al-Din a mask, made of the bones of a strange animal like unto a tiger, and he did say "This mask comes from the time before time, from the time when the angels and the djinn did war, and it was used by the djinn to hide their visages from the angels. Place this mask upon the face of thy child. This mask will hide the mark on his forehead from the angel of Death[21], but be warned – should the mask ever be removed, that moment Death will seize thy son."

And so Shihab al-Din did place the mask upon the face of Mahbubur, and Mahbubur did live, and did prosper and thrive.

Yet the will of Allah will not be thwarted, and soon the mark which had been upon the forehead of Mahbubur did appear upon the head of Shihab al-Din, and he did sicken, and upon the first birthday of Mahbubur he did die, for destiny will take the lives it has been promised.

Knowing he was to die, Shihab al-Din did call upon his wife, and did say unto her:

"O my wife, knowest thou that Mahbubur may never remove his mask, so long as he doth live, for should he remove the mask, he shall surely perish, and mine own death shall have been in vain."

And the wife of Shihab al-Din, being a good and faithful wife, promised that never should Mahbubur be allowed to remove his mask.

And so did Mahbubur grow to be a strong man, and wise, and yet did never show his face, until after the day of his marriage. Mahbubur was wed to a woman beautiful and fair of skin, who did love him with all her heart, yet on her wedding night she did despair, for she could not see the face of her husband.

"O my husband," saith the wife of Mahbubur, "remove thy mask of bone, that I may see thy visage, and kiss it, and love you as a faithful wife should."

"O my wife, I cannot do such," saith Mahbubur, "for should I remove my mask, I shall surely die!"

And so on the wedding night of Mahbubur, he did leave his mask on, and his wife remained vexed.

On the second night of their marriage, Mahbubur's wife did say "O my husband, I am loyal and faithful to you, yet you do not show me thy

countenance. Why will thou not allow me to gaze upon thy features?"

And Mahbubur did say unto his wife, "O my wife, if I were to remove my mask, I shall die as certainly as the sun shall rise on the morrow."

"But this is great foolishness!" replied the wife of Mahbubur, "for a mask can not prevent one from dying when it is his time, for only Allah (a thousand praises unto him) can set the date of a man's death!"

"Nonetheless," saith Mahbubur, "to remove my mask would mean my death, and that I shall never do."

And so on the second night of his marriage, Mahbubur remained masked.

On the third night, the wife of Mahbubur did say again "O my husband, remove thy mask that I may gaze upon the face of the man to whom I am wed."

"No, my wife," replied Mahbubur, "for to do so would be my doom!"

"But my husband," saith the wife of Mahbubur, "this is superstition such as one might hear from the itinerant or those in the countryside[22]! Surely thou knowest that thou can come to no harm by removing thy skull mask?"

"I can do no such thing, for surely I shall die," respondeth Mahbubur.

Yet after Mahbubur passed into sleep, his wife was overcome by curiosity, and thought to herself "Mahbubur will never know should I remove his mask, for he doth sleep, and then I shall know the face of my love, and will not need to ask him again."

Thinking thus, she did reach across and lift off the mask from the sleeping form of Mahbubur.

As soon as she did so, the room was filled with a howling and laughter, as the angel of death rejoiced in his triumph. And when she looked down, she saw not her husband, but the rotting corpse of a one-year-old baby, dead those nineteen years, while in her hand remained the mask, grinning at her with the face of death itself.

Thus we learn (saith the second Wazir) that destiny will not be denied. One can try to pass one's destiny off on another, and it may work for some small time, but destiny's accounts will be settled, and time is no obstacle to such settling.

Chapter 13

From the *Sunday Herald* 27th November:

The Sunday Interview: Senator Matt Nelson

Rachel Edwards

Over the coming weeks, as the US Presidential campaign heats up in advance of the coming primaries, we will be interviewing each of the main candidates from the two major parties, and discovering their vision for America's future. This week, Senator Matt Nelson (DFL-MN), talks to Rachel Edwards.

The first thing you notice when meeting Matt Nelson is That Smile, the one that could have graced a thousand magazine covers if he hadn't chosen to go into politics. The man is, quite simply, gorgeous – six foot two, with the kind of huge hair that only Americans (and then usually only American politicians) ever have, with just a hint of grey to assure us that the black in the rest of his hair is not a dye. Better journalists than I have turned in articles that are nothing but rhapsodies about his blue-green eyes (or eye – he lost his right eye in a football accident as a teenager, and seems self-conscious about it, often turning that side of his face away from whoever he's talking to), and favourable comparisons have been made to George Clooney. But the second thing you notice when meeting him is the man's intelligence, and it was his thoughts I was here to talk to him about.

Senator Nelson, your critics have accused you of being a radical, even a socialist. What do you say to that?

Well, Rachel, "radical" is a term I'll take as a compliment. I think this country is facing problems that need radical solutions, if we're to compete with China and the other developing nations, and do so without destroying the planet in the process. We need to be radical if we want to have a decent standard of living for our poorest citizens. We need to be radical if we want to make America the country we all know it could be.

As for socialist…clearly the people who say that have never spoken to a real socialist. I'm a free-market capitalist, and proud of it. Capitalism is what has given this country every great improvement in living standards it has ever had. Markets work.

I'm just in favour of a truly *free* market – one where workers have the

freedom to move their labour without losing their healthcare. One where entrepreneurs with fresh new ideas aren't kept out of business by cartels and monopolies. And for that kind of freedom to exist, you need the government to intervene to make everyone play nice with each other. And I don't think that's been happening as often as it should have.

I think most Americans want to have free enterprise, but they also want to be able to keep their houses if they get sick, to be able to send their kids to college, and for their kids to be able to afford their own homes so they don't have to live in the basement until they're forty. I don't think that makes most Americans Marxists.

Why are you standing for election? What do you think you have to offer compared to the other candidates?

Well…look, I don't want to get into negative campaigning here. That's something that has damaged far too many campaigns. I have my differences with the other people running for the Democratic nomination, but they're all still Democrats. Vice-President Gribbin has been an important part of one of the most successful administrations of my lifetime. I've had my disagreements with the administration, of course, but I've been proud to be a small part of the work they've done to improve Americans' lives. And Ted O'Brien has been one of my political heroes since I was a small boy.

But…

And Rick Lehman?

Heh…as I said, I have nothing but admiration for Vice-President Gribbin and Senator O'Brien.

But…and this is no offence to either of them…they're both, to my mind, too tied up in the Washington mentality. Ted O'Brien has been a senator for forty years. Ken Gribbin has been Vice-President for eight. They're both very, very good at using old, safe, solid political ideas and processes to get results. I just happen to think we need a few new ideas to go with those old ones.

But I think either of them would make a very good President, and in the unlikely event I don't win the nomination I look forward to campaigning for them. I just think I'd be better.

Your campaign has had some striking differences from traditional campaigns. Would you like to talk about your *Change For A Day*

campaign?

You know, I think you're the first journalist to actually ask me about that.

Really?

Yes. They're mostly only interested in polling, fundraising, all that kind of stuff. I'm glad to get a chance to talk about this, because I think it's the most important thing we've been doing.

It's an idea I got from, of all radical, subversive, un-American organisations, the Boy Scouts. You see, to me, politics – the whole *point* of politics – is to make a difference to people's lives. We're trying to change the world, as corny as that sounds.

But most Americans – and I can't say that I think they're wrong here – don't think politics is anything to do with them. If you're a factory worker in Detroit who's been laid off and doesn't know where the next job is coming from, or you're a farmer in Minnesota who's had to take on a second job because buyers are paying less for corn than the seed costs you – or, for that matter, if you're a journalist from a print newspaper that's losing ten percent of its circulation every year, and you're scared of losing your job – then you're not worried about the deficit, or about the situation in Saudi Arabia.

So we decided that the best thing a campaign could do would be to help people to help each other. So we started the *Change For A Day* campaign. Every day, each of our campaign volunteers tries to do one thing to make their community a better place. It might be something as simple as giving a dollar to a homeless person on the street near where they work, or it might be volunteering in a soup kitchen, or helping clear garbage up off the streets, or going to the store for a senior citizen with mobility problems. It could also be a more traditional political activity like registering people to vote. Most of the things people do only take ten minutes of course – small things like helping people across the road. We have a thing on our website – I think there's an app for it as well, but I don't really understand what the difference between a website and an app is – where volunteers can track the changes they've made.

Now, the hope is, of course, that some of the people who've been helped will remember this and vote for me, but even if they don't, over the time we've been doing this – which has been ever since I got re-elected to the Senate, three years ago – our volunteers have fed tens of thousands of

hungry people, have made hundreds of streets throughout the country safer and cleaner, and most importantly, have become more involved in, and more invested in, their communities.

Sorry, I'm giving a speech here, aren't I? Never ask a politician a question, Ms. Edwards, unless you bring a book to read while they answer.

No problem, I had no plans for this week anyway. Anyway, you have some fairly controversial views…

Do I?

You know you do.

Such as?

Well, marijuana decriminalisation, for one…

I hardly think that's controversial among the general public, Rachel. An actual majority of Americans use marijuana now, and most of the ones who don't couldn't care less what other people get up to. Meanwhile, we're spending ten billion dollars a year arresting people and locking them up for it. I'm sure we can find a better use for that ten billion dollars than locking up a few stoners.

But of course, that's not one of my major policy platforms. I'm campaigning on the things that matter to people. You can tell that just by looking at my volunteers.

Okay, I'll bite. Tell me about your campaign volunteers, Senator

Well, look at them. They're *enthusiastic*. That's not something you see in other campaigns. And for all that some of them are a little odd – I have a lot of geeks in my campaign, which I'm told isn't an insult any more – we're friendly. They're like family – like they're all cousins and I'm their grandfather. I'm a little bit of an old fogey compared to them, but the same things matter to us all.

So they've been out there *working*. We have only a small number of volunteers in Iowa, for example – only about three thousand. But they've been out there, each of them, personally visiting twenty people a week for the last three years. That means that, give or take, the average Iowan has had three visits from our campaign since I first started.

So you've not been targeting, then?

Well, we've been concentrating on registered Democrats, of course –

they're the ones who will vote for me in the caucus, and who are most likely to vote for me in the election itself. But half the people in Iowa are Republicans – and, nationwide, so are half the voters in the whole country, because of course we're campaigning in every state, though not quite so intensively. I'm not going to leave those people behind. Yes, they might not switch their allegiance and join the Democrats, but they might still be persuaded to vote for me in the election – or if not for me, then for one of my volunteers, many of whom are running for local positions, some of them non-partisan. If I don't get elected, but we get an extra hundred and fifty liberal judges elected, who might be more interested in justice than in punishing people for the crime of being black, that in itself will be worth it.

Though, of course, I do want to be elected.

Well, obviously

But it's far more important to me that we can get some change in the political culture in this country. America is the greatest nation on earth, still, but I don't think anyone who's paying attention would argue that we have a political culture that's working in the interests of the American people. We have senators who are owned and paid for by oil companies, Representatives who represent not the people of their district but the businesses that have factories there, and a news media that is more obsessed with the First Lady's dresses than in the policies put forward by her husband. *That* is what I'm in politics to change, and that, even more than the individual policies I support, is the main message of my campaign.

At heart, you see, I'm a goo-goo.

A goo-goo?

Ah, I can tell you've not been involved in American politics for very long. Goo-goo is what our opponents call us, short for "good government". It means that I think that it's far more important that the government be free from corruption, and that it deals with the American people fairly, than exactly what policies it implements. Policies can always be changed, mistakes can always be rectified, if the structures are good and the people in place are honest. But if you have bad structures and corrupt officials, as we've seen too often over the years, it doesn't make much difference what the policies are. I would much rather see a competent, honest Republican in power than an incompetent, dishonest Democrat. It's much easier to vote out a competent person. Luckily, of course, in the current race there are no incompetent, dishonest Democrats. **OH FOR THE LOVE OF…PLEASE**

And Republicans?

There are very few who are *both* incompetent and dishonest, I'll give them that much. But this really isn't a partisan matter for me. *Obviously* I want the Democrats to win – if I didn't, I wouldn't be a Democrat, would I? – but I want the best man to win more than that (and I'd want the best woman to win if there were any women running at the moment). If the Republicans manage to select a candidate who will run this country reasonably, and look out for its people, and who will put the interests of America before the interests of his own pocket book, and if the American people, in turn, decide to elect that candidate, then I'll wish him the best of luck.

Anyway, I'm going to have to wrap this up. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

And you.

Chapter 14

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

Finding myself impecunious, and with my debt coming due, I had to resort to the only option open to an honest man in my position. I resolved to steal the money, forthwith.

Understand, in the normal course of events, theft is never justified. In the normal state of affairs, one is surrounded by one's compatriots, or by those who have welcomed one into their tribe. To steal from those offering hospitality, or from one's own people, is the most dishonourable action imaginable, and I would gladly die rather than steal a farthing from the richest Shaykh in a tribe that had welcomed me.

To take from a wealthy stranger, though, one who has not offered hospitality and to whom no loyalty of place, regiment or blood is owed, and who has less need than the thief, is sometimes a necessary act. And to do so in order to pay an honestly owed debt is an honourable act.

The question, then, was not whether to steal, but what to steal. Merchandise is the easiest option – one can easily walk up to a stall, purloin some small item, and walk off with the stallholder none the wiser. Yet it presents the problem of conversion. In order to obtain currency, one has to sell the stolen item, and this can often be more difficult than many people will appreciate, especially to one unaccustomed to the mercantile arts. A handful of dates may well be worth tuppence when sold by a stallholder who regularly deals in such matters, who is known to his customers and in turn knows their tastes. When one has no stall, however, dates are not a saleable commodity, and so a handful of them would only turn into a paltry meal, rather than a coin.

However, to steal coins directly requires more subtlety. Many merchants keep their money about their person, and are fiercely jealous of anyone who attempts to take it, and in Araby it is the custom for one caught attempting theft to have his hand cut off for his first offence. As I wished to retain the services of both my hands, this presented something of a challenge.

Thankfully, then, my faithful servant Salman was an accomplished pickpocket. However, even the most proficient of thieves requires an

accomplice when attempting to acquire the profits of an Arabian merchant, and thus we concocted a scheme in which I would act as Salman's confederate. My job was simply to distract whichever merchant we chose, while Salman made away with whatever cash it was within his power to purloin.

We chose the thinnest merchant in the marketplace; Salman reasoning, convincingly, that the fatter the merchant, the more likely it was that he had little of value to sell. A fat merchant is one who invests his profits in his belly, rather than in his business, while a thin one is a man who has spent the money he would otherwise have spent on food on stock for his stall. And this merchant was thin to the point of emaciation, with a hawkish look in his eye which said to all that he was more concerned with his profits than with the pleasures of the flesh. All those who have engaged, for whatever reasons, in the ancient art of depriving a man of what is his, know that such men are far easier to part from their money than are those who love it less, for in their eagerness to obtain the money that is not yet in their possession, they can be careless to the point of obliviousness with the money they already own.

The stall we chose was selling fine clothing, which it would have been impractical to steal and even more impractical to sell. Thankfully, though, the merchant was enamoured enough of his own stock that the garb he wore was of the same type he sold, and thus was typical desert clothing, not blessed with an overabundance of pockets. This meant that his cash must be stored nearby.

Salman and I parted company, and I approached the stall and examined a *dishdasha* intently, as if intending to purchase it. When the stallholder came over, I inquired as to the cost of the robe.

"Six *piastres*" replied the merchant.

"Six *piastres*?" I asked incredulously, "Surely, sir, you are mistaken? I saw a *dishdasha* much finer than that on the stall of a man not far from here, and he was charging only three."

"Sir, you must be mistaken yourself. There is no other stallholder here who sells robes so fine as this. Nay – there is no stallholder within thirty miles who will sell such finery. And were you to find such a merchant – should Allah grant you the good fortune to find another *dishdasha* the like of this anywhere within three days' walk – he would not be so foolish as I, and would surely charge at least ten *piastres* for such a fine piece of cloth,

even were it not so finely cut."

"Are you, sir, calling me a liar? Are you telling me that what I saw with my own eyes – a stallholder selling a *dishdasha* quite alike to this in every detail – is a figment of my imagination, a fairy story?"

"Oh, sir, I would never do such a thing! Call such a customer as yourself a liar! I should never stoop so low! I merely suggest, respectfully and humbly, that your judgement of the quality of the cloth you were shown may have been impaired. Possibly you were the victim of an unscrupulous, fraudulent, merchant? Such people are all too common in these most decadent times, and they may use many disgraceful tricks to make their merchandise appear more appealing than truly it is – tricks that I have learned, so I know what to warn my customers against, but which, of course, I would no more use myself than I would…" and he carried on in this vein for some considerable time, during which Salman crept behind his stall, found his cash box, and emptied it.

As we had agreed, I then shouted "Stop, thief!", being well aware that Salman was more than capable of outrunning the decrepit stallholder. The merchant gave chase, and I availed myself of the opportunity to help myself to the *dishdasha* that had been under discussion. And a fine piece of clothing it was, as well.

Chapter 15

That column was by**Sorry to interrupt**

Sorry about this, it's me, the Shift, again. Before we get too far into this book, I should explain what History actually *is*, since we're going to be trying to stop someone changing it. (You *are* going to try to help me, aren't you?)

Don't worry about what Dave was going to say. You can pick it up in chapter nineteen. I've shuffled the chapters around a bit and pushed in here, but it'll all make sense later on.

So, you remember those Great Houses I told you about before, the ones with the sense of fun of a ninety-five-year-old nun and the godlike powers? Well, they created History-with-a-capital-h. Or at least they say they did, and nobody's arguing with anyone that powerful. They might even be telling the truth.

What they say they did, way back at the beginning of time, is something they call the Anchoring of the Thread, ominous capitals and all. They took the primordial chaos of spacetime and turned it into something with a structure – with a narrative, an arc of history, a *purpose*. After the Anchoring, time was no longer a set of disconnected events, but it was a pattern you could follow. And that pattern, that narrative, was set up in the Great Houses' favour. The Great Houses would dominate history forever, and the only way anyone could change that would be to get hold of the Houses' source of power, unpick the thread of history, and put a new one in its place.

Which they could never do, because of course anyone wanting to do that would be living in the history the Great Houses created.

Or that's the theory, anyway.

In practice, there's a little wiggle room.

I don't know if you know about fractals? You do? Oh good. Well, you'll know that a fractal looks very, very, complicated, but is actually very simple – it takes a small pattern and repeats it at infinitely many scales. So you can take the smallest part of it and enlarge it, and it looks just like the whole thing – sometimes a little bent or twisted, but still recognisably the same pattern. And then you can take a little bit of *that*, enlarge it again, and

get the same effect. And so *ad infinitum*.

And the Great Houses, when they set up History, set it up as a fractal. It's the easiest thing to do if you want something to have a *lot* of interesting, fiddly, details, but you don't actually want to draw in all the twiddles yourself. And the Houses are nothing if not lazy.

Even humans – not, in all fairness, the most time-sensitive of species, I have to say – have noticed this fractal quality to history and the universe. You say things like "history repeats", or "as above, so below", because they're true – you're seeing the patterns.

But if you see the patterns, you can change them.

And the problem with a fractal history is that if you change one of the patterns, you change them all. One tiny change can change the whole thing, because the changes are repeated at every scale.

You're probably thinking about "the butterfly effect" now, but this is much, much, more serious. The butterfly effect changes the future, but changing a pattern in history makes the change *throughout* history – past, present, and future all change, and then they've *always* been like that. And it's also not like the butterfly effect because the butterfly effect is unpredictable – you can't *actually* cause a hurricane in Brazil by judicious application of lepidopterae – but you can predict the changes made to history. It's a pattern, not a chaotic system.

What this means is that you can make a very small, almost unnoticeable, change in one tiny fragment of the pattern, and the change will ripple out everywhere, without it looking like cause and effect. Someone prophesies that seven decapitated heads will talk, and not only does the prophecy come true in the future, but back in the twelfth century Hassan i Sabbah gets the idea to bury one of his people up to the neck, pour some blood around, and pretend his head's been cut off, then have him suddenly open his eyes and start talking about Hell.

(Hassan later had the poor bugger's head *actually* cut off. It'd have rather spoiled the trick otherwise.)

Luckily, only time-sensitive entities can tell where the pressure points are – the points at which the changes can be made. And almost all the time-sensitives in the universe are members of the Great Houses (or their Enemy, and the Houses and their Enemy have been exerting such an equal force on those points since the War started that neither of them can make a

real change).

But that doesn't mean that changes to History don't get made – sometimes by accident, sometimes by renegade time-sensitives. And those changes need to be fixed, if we want cause to keep coming before effect, and tomorrow to come after today.

And fixing those changes was what I used to do. But there was one change I couldn't fix…

Chapter 16

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part five

It hath come unto us that King Shahryār, by now the most repentant of men, was howling and weeping sore as the head of Shahrazad, that most chaste and pure of women who had been killed because of the King's rash promise, continued to speak. And though he stopped up his ears, and ran in terror from her pronouncements, yet still he heard her voice, though only Allah (who is all-knowing) knows how he heard her.

O great and noble King (quoth the head of the unfortunate woman) it hath reached me that after the First and Second Wazirs had told their tale, the third Wazir was sore afraid, for he too had no story to tell, and while an old man may tell a tale of the past, and a clever man may know of the present, only Allah himself (a thousand praises unto him) knows the future to tell.

Yet it is claimed by some that there are those, of secret tribes not known to outsiders, who have the powers of telling the future. These powers are granted by the Shaytan (a million curses upon his most despicable head!) and cannot be trusted, yet they are powers that can tempt weak men, as the great Qu'ran reminds us:

Shall I inform you upon whom the Shayatin[23] descend? They descend on every lying, sinful person who gives ear, and most of them are liars.

For only Allah knows the truth of what is to come, yet sometimes he informs his angels of these matters. And if Shaytan or the *Shayatin*, a thousand times a thousand times may they be cursed, eavesdrop upon the talk of the angels, then they may know something of what is to come, though they see it as reflected in a dirty pool. So then these deceivers may mix these small truths with their lies, as an assassin may mix poison in good wine, and so bring ruin to men.

Yet this Wazir gave no thought to this, for while he was a cunning man, he was a fool in the way that only those who are wise about the world can be. Thus cared he more for power over the Shaykh's dominions than for obeying the blessed Qu'ran.

So the Wazir had studied, in secret, for many years the secrets of

conjuring the *Shayatin*, and of binding them to his will, so he could call upon them should his own wits ever be unequal to a task. Thus walked he out into the desert, and recited a certain poem which it is not meet to mention, and made certain gestures, and in front of him appeared one of the foulest of the *Shayatin*, a foul beast standing an arm's-length again taller than any man, and with a face like unto that of a rat and the teeth of a dog. This daemon had the breath of a thousand hyaenas, and went beardless like the *kuffars* [24], and its skin was paler than that of any man, and though it came forth in the desert sun, as bright as it hath ever been, and long past the hour of noon, shadow cast he none that the Wazir could see, though he searched the ground for sign of it in vain. When the daemon saw the Wazir, it made as to attack him, its talons outstretched and fangs bared.

"Stay, foul daemon, I command thee!" cried the Wazir. "Thou art bound to me, and must do my bidding!"

The beast growled, but did naught to break the magickal bonds which had been placed on it, for the Wazir had used powerful magicks indeed.

"Tell me, daemon!" crieth the Wazir, "Tell me a tale of what is to come, a tale of good and evil that I may defeat my opponents and become the Shaykh thereafter!"

So the daemon spake, though its voice was painful to the ear, and the Wazir listened to the tale, and then banished the daemon back to Jahannam whence he came.

And the Wazir thought long and hard upon this tale, for it was a tale which surpassed all understanding of mortal men, but he knew that it was a good tale, and one that would bring him riches and the power of the Shaykh.

The tale that the daemon had told was one of many lands, and many kingdoms, and of a war that spanned them all, of the Mal'akh[25] and the Celestial Ones, and the battle of the angels and the djinn and the *Shayatin*, and the tale told of the mighty warrior *Sh'vay*[26], who was chosen by the angels to serve their cause, and of Civitata[27], who was a city and a woman both and the embodiment of Allah's mercy[28]. All this and more did it tell, and the Wazir felt as if his head itself was to burst, for one man could not contain within him such a story.

Yet the Wazir knew that the story was false, for the story told of the destruction of Jannat, and of the victory of Iblis, and all know that the Holy Qu'ran, a thousand thanks to Allah the all-merciful for his gift of it, tells us

that Allah (praise be unto him) can never be destroyed or defeated.

Yet within that tale was a shorter tale, a tale of good and evil, of a monster and the good man who defeated it. And that tale, the Wazir knew he could tell, for it had the smell of truth about it.

So that night, the Wazir returned to the Shaykh, and he saith unto the Shaykh:

“O great and mighty Shaykh, dost thou still desire me to relate unto you a tale of the future?”

“O my Wazir,” the Shaykh replied, “thou knowest it.”

“O my Shaykh, the story I have to tell is a dread and fearsome one. It tells of a future that must come, and it is not meet and proper for a man to know the future. Though you desire it told, such a tale can never cause good to come. I ask you again, knowing this, dost thou still wish me to tell this tale?”

“O my Wazir,” saith the Shaykh, “I must hear your tale, that I may judge your worth. This I have said and I will not relent.”

“O my Shaykh, I must ask you once more, for tales of the future are not meant for the ears of men. Ask me not to tell it.”

“O my Wazir, tell your tale you must, should you wish to live another night.”

“Then may Allah the all-merciful forgive me for what must result.”

Chapter 17

From the *Sunday Herald,* 8th January

A View From Iowa

Rachel Edwards

A week is a long time in politics, they say, and this week is no exception. What was shock news on Tuesday night will be as cold as yesterday's mashed (Iowan) potatoes by the time you read this on Sunday morning. So I'll take it as read that *Herald* readers, politically savvy as you are, paid attention to the results of last Tuesday's Iowa caucus and noticed that Matt Nelson, the candidate I've been shadowing in these columns for the last few weeks, did surprisingly well.

He still only came in third place, of course, behind Senators O'Brien and Lehman, but he actually beat Vice-President Gribbin into fourth place, which is an astonishing achievement that until now no-one except Nelson himself appears to have believed possible.

Of course, Gribbin is still the favourite to win the Democratic nomination – there's a clear pattern when it comes to the nominations in both major political parties. If you're a sitting President, you get to run again. If you're a sitting Vice-President, and the President is in his second term, you get to run. And if no sitting President or Vice-President is in the running, then the guy who came second last time gets the job. Little things like primaries only really matter if there is no one to take his turn. The voters know what they're meant to do.

But Gribbin has a remarkably low profile for a Veep, especially one in such a popular administration. Partly that's because President Sampson has used him as the administration's attack dog and little else – voters don't tend to warm to people when all they see is them tearing others apart, even if they think it's right to do so – but also it's the man's own character. He's a bruiser of the old school, and looks it, with his bulldog face and pot belly, which even the best-tailored suits can't hide. He's a party machine man to the core, and he's far more loyal to the Democratic party than to any individual policy or political position, but he's always been more of a back-room worker than someone who's sought out the limelight. Before going into politics proper, he was a union activist in Chicago, and the street-fighting attitude has never really left him. While this puts him at a

disadvantage, it also gives him a certain down-to-earth appeal – almost uniquely for someone to have risen to such high office, he seems to see himself as a working man doing a job, rather than someone who should be given celebrity status in his own right.

And in that respect, if nothing else, he's similar to Senator Nelson.

Talking to voters around Iowa in recent weeks, it's become apparent that the support for Nelson has almost nothing to do with his personal qualities. The typical Democratic voter, even those who support him, says "he's a nice enough guy, I guess" and little else (the Republicans say "he's a Communist atheist who wants to sell out our country", but then they'd say that about Ronald Reagan these days).

The support, rather, comes from two groups.

The first, and smaller, group is made up of those who actually agree with his ideas. By British standards Nelson is a moderate leftist, but in the uniquely skewed political landscape of America that makes him a screaming radical somewhere to the left of Lenin. Those who have been hoping for a voice with ideas even slightly outside the insane consensus of the two main parties are ecstatic to hear someone actually talking about issues like drugs, gun control or immigration in something like a sensible manner.

The larger group, though, is made up of people who have met, and been inspired by, one of Nelson's campaign team. His team claim to have spoken to every single voter in Iowa, in person, over the last two years, and they've done so with a sense of fun that is missing from most of the political scene. When Senator Lehman made a speech decrying factionalism within the party, for example, they quickly got T-shirts printed up with the slogan "Faction Nelson".

This light-heartedness has been misread by some as a sign that Nelson's campaign is lightweight, that it doesn't focus enough on the serious business of politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's precisely because they consider politics so serious that they have a sense of humour about it. As one of them said to me "We laugh about this stuff, because otherwise we'd have to cry about it."

But this is a new experience in America, where the dominant voices on right and left for the last forty years have been angry ones – on the left, the righteous anger of those who have been oppressed for too long and who want to overthrow their oppressors, and on the right, the petulant shouting

of the over privileged angry white men who are finally having to give up a tiny bit of their power and are reacting like a dog whose dinner-bowl is being stolen before it's finished eating.

And this is all the odder because the American people have always been suckers for optimism. As a nation, they don't really go for fear and anger in their politicians, but for hope, optimism and a friendly, smiling face. Any politician who can give them those things is pretty much a guaranteed winner.

So the ordinary people of Iowa – people who, in many respects, are Nelson's ideological opposites, with the "support our troops" and "life begins at conception" bumper stickers on their SUVs – are far more supportive of the Nelson campaign than anyone, except possibly Nelson himself, would have predicted even a month ago.

But can that support carry through to polling day? Many have their doubts. I spoke to one of Nelson's internal pollsters, off the record, and was told that the primary support for Nelson was coming from "CDE"s (or poor people) especially people of colour. As the pollster put it "we have a name for those people. The n-word. Non-voters."

The question is whether those people don't vote because they don't care about the outcome, or whether they don't vote because they think their votes don't matter – and, indeed, in the case of about three million of them, whether they were even allowed to vote at all before now.

The political establishment in Washington, on both sides, are convinced that whatever the reason, those people won't turn out to vote, and that even if some of them are voting in the primaries (something of which most of the politicos are resolutely unconvinced, no matter what the polls tell them) none of them will turn out for the presidential election itself. They've all seen too many campaigns built on slogans about hope and change which collapsed once the attack ads started.

But Nelson's campaign hasn't been built on slogans, but on actions and on building communities. Nelson is risking his whole campaign – his whole career – on what amounts to a belief about human nature; the belief that while someone might not have voted of their own free will, they might decide to vote as a favour to Charlie or Jane or Rebecca, because they helped them move house, or mowed their lawn, or looked after their kids. And he's hoping that they'll not only vote as a favour, but they'll vote for the candidate that Charlie or Jane or Rebecca support, also as a favour.

Whether he's right about this or not remains to be seen.

Certainly last night's debate seemed to help his cause, though. Where the other candidates waffled when asked their opinion on the Middle East crisis, Nelson gave a straight answer. It's not an answer that will have pleased everyone (it certainly didn't please me), but it was the only straight answer of the night.

"If two countries have both declared themselves enemies of America, and they're both fighting each other, surely it's in our best interests not to interfere in that fight? I have nothing but sympathy for the people getting killed, and we should support the UN in its attempts to broker a ceasefire, but my enemy's enemy is not my friend."

If Matt Nelson can keep up this level of straight talking, without frightening too many people away in the process, then though it's still an outside chance, it's entirely possible that this time next year, instead of Senator Nelson, we'll be talking about President Nelson.

Chapter 18

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

I had now obtained the money to repay my creditors, and a little to spare, but yet there was one debt remaining to be paid, for I had promised Salman one hundred *piastres* for his service to me, and while the boy's loyalty was assured by this point – he being the snivellingly servile type of Arab who has no regard for his dignity when in the presence of his natural superiors – he was nonetheless anxious to receive the payment that was his due. And I, being a man of honour, could not deny him the payment which I had promised, for a gentleman always keeps his word, even when the promise has been made to one of the lower orders.

In need of coin, then, I quickly concocted a scheme by which to turn the twenty *piastres* still in my possession into two hundred. With these last few small coins, I purchased a basket, made to my specifications by a basket-weaver, and a number of cheap rings of the kind made as toys for children. Borrowing a rope, a cloth, a length of string, and a sword from members of the caravan, Salman and I ventured to the nearest village, where we spent the day announcing that at dusk the greatest magical feat imaginable would be performed.

As the sun went down, I took my place in the village square, wearing long, flowing, robes which stretched to my feet, and facing toward the setting sun, allowing a crowd to gather while Salman contented himself by climbing up and down the two trees between which I stood, and jumping from one to the other.

"O honourable, fortunate, gentlemen!" I began my announcement, "You are today lucky indeed, for Allah has blessed you with the opportunity to witness the most spectacular sight that will ever be seen – a feat of conjuration that will awe you, for the powers with which Allah has blessed me are wondrous indeed. Bring me my basket, my son."

Salman, playing the part of my son, brought the basket, from which I removed the rope, before showing the audience that the basket was empty, and hitting the base with the pommel of my scimitar, to prove it was not a false bottom. I then placed the basket on the ground, between the two trees,

and placed one end of the rope in the basket.

"Now, O gracious gentlemen, watch as a miracle shall take place! I take this rope, and throw it to the heavens, and Allah himself will hold it there!"

Saying this, I flung the other end of the rope up into the air, and the rope did not fall, but instead hung in a straight line.

"O father, what a miracle!" Salman exulted. "I shall climb the rope, and surely go to Jannat and see Allah himself!"

Salman began climbing the rope, and I took on a furious aspect.

"O blasphemous child! Do you think that you can reach the heavens before Allah wills it? What blasphemy is this?"

Saying this, I pulled viciously on the rope, and it, and Salman, fell down into the basket. I stood behind the basket and threw the cloth over it, shouting, "If you wish to meet thy maker, impudent child, I shall send you to him directly!"

I thrust my scimitar into the basket thrice, then thrice more. With the first thrusts came screams, and blood leaking out of the basket, but with the last thrusts only silence.

When I had finished, I collapsed, weeping, over the basket, beating my breast and bemoaning my fate, that I had murdered my only son.

I then prayed, giving every impression of sincerity, that my son should be restored to me. I took the basket and lifted it over my head, crying to the heavens "Bring back my son, O Lord, restore him to life and health!"

Then I turned the basket upside down, and out fell Salman, alive and well, but covered in blood.

At this, the crowd were astonished, and at this point I explained the trick.

"Gentlemen, you have seen a miracle tonight, but it is a miracle that you, too, could perform, for I have done this by means of my holy ring." (At this, I showed them one of the cheap rings on my finger). "Should you purchase one of these from me, you shall be blessed from this day forth by Allah, and you too shall have the power of life and death, and the power to animate the inanimate. You will have luck until the end of your days, which will be a very long time from now, should you buy a ring."

"But should you not buy a ring, then misfortune will curse you, and

your wives shall be barren, and your sons shall be effeminates, and your line will end with you."

"Which among you wishes, then, to buy one of these rings? For only twenty *piastres* you can work miracles!"

Salman then went among the crowd, selling rings to the foolish and easily gulled peasants, before we packed our things and returned to the caravan a few miles away. There we shared the money, although I took an extra thirty *piastres* from Salman, knowing he had secreted at least that much about his person before he produced the takings for us to split.

And while I cannot, of course, reveal the whole trick to my readers, it may amuse you to note that I gained another thirty *piastres* at the next village we arrived at, by selling my false-backed basket to one of the itinerant *fakirs* plying his trade there.

Chapter 19

So the reason I read this column was because of one of the guys on the message board, Tim, he keeps talking about his sister, and how she's into all this commie feminazi crap like my Helen, but how she's actually making money off it. Like, she's some big star over there in England, because she goes on the internet and talks crap…pardon my language… talks poop about men and capitalism and white people and all this kind of thing. Over there they love that kind of thing, it turns out, and she even gets to go on TV once or twice just to talk about her opinions, like anyone wants to see that. But I guess they do over there.

But anyway, a lot of us didn't actually believe Tim about this, because there's no way you can make a living from just talking about how you're annoyed at the government – or anyway, if there is, I'm in the wrong job and so are a lot of guys I know. But we put up with Tim's stories because he's one of the good guys. Really cares about stuff, you know?

But then Tim told us that his little sister was going to be travelling over here, and if we saw her to say "Hi". Now, none of us actually believed that this little sister really existed, so we ripped on him a little bit, saying it was him in a wig, and stuff like that. You know, guy stuff.

But Tim got a little pissed, and he posted a link to the *London Sunday Herald*, where this Rachel Edwards was talking about coming over here to follow the Nelson campaign. Turns out that they have a whole thing over there where they report on our elections. Seems weird to me – we don't fill our newspapers with stuff about their elections – but maybe that's just because not much happens over there, so they have to fill their newspapers up with stuff from places where more interesting stuff happens. I don't know.

But anyway, she's coming over here and travelling around with the Nelson campaign. I read her article, and it was just the sort of commie bull that Tim had said she was paid for, so apparently he was right, you *can* get paid for that.

But the thing that struck me was that this girl looked just like those girls who'd been killed. I mean, *exactly* like them. They were all these little, punky-looking girls. You know the type – dark hair dyed purple, stuff stuck in their nose, skinny, pretty-looking. Even though she was from England and they were from the Midwest, she could have been their twin sister.

So immediately, I was worried for this girl. She was obviously a commie, but even liberals don't deserve to be killed. And anyway, she was Tim's sister, and I didn't want anything to happen to her because of that. She's only a kid, she doesn't understand politics the way we do, she doesn't deserve to die because of that.

So I sent Tim a few private messages. He didn't seem too worried though. He told me that presidential candidates often have young women killed, and that it was totally normal behaviour for members of the conspiracy, but that Rachel would be safe because she was a useful idiot – someone the conspiracy could use for propaganda.

And that made sense, kind of. If you were Matt Nelson, and you wanted to kill some girl, who would you kill – some slut nobody cared about who wouldn't be missed, or someone who was world famous in England, who kept writing articles in the newspaper about how great you were?

I still worried, though. I just couldn't help it. This girl might be in danger, and I had to stop it. But Tim persuaded me that she was safe for now – and that the main priority was to make sure that this monster could never become President.

And the messages I'd been seeing were also saying I needed to stop him. I kept seeing them all over the place. "NELSON MUST NOT WIN". I kept seeing that everywhere. And messages telling me to get a message to the girl Rachel, telling her to stop him.

But I didn't know how to get in touch with her, and I definitely didn't know how to stop someone becoming the President. But then the messages started telling me something I *did* know how to do.

"TALK TO BILL HUNTER", they started saying. "BILL CAN HELP YOU".

I'd started going to these meetings. Just guys, from the message board, you know? And Bill Hunter was one of them.

Now, Bill was unusual for that group. Most of us aren't too well up on our reading. Not that we're stupid, or anything – it's a smart bunch of guys – but we just work with our hands, you know? We're practical men, and if we're going to read a book, it'll be by Clive Cussler or James Patterson, not some artsy-fartsy European crap.

But Bill read a *lot*. And he was smart, with it. He worked with computers, and he understood them, but his real interest was finding out

about the Muslims. He says you need to know your enemy, and that the Muslims will be taking over the country and imposing sharia law real soon, so we need to know their weaknesses so we could exploit them. He had all sorts of books about the Muslims, and about Arabia and so on.

He's a smart guy, Bill. Only a little guy, skinny, with a scrubby little beard and glasses… looks a bit of a nerd, to be honest. But he can think of things the rest of us wouldn't ever imagine, and he doesn't take on any airs and graces – he's just one of the guys, not someone who thinks he's better than us. I think he does something with computers, at least he's always wearing these black T-shirts with white writing on them that looks like it's about computer stuff. I've never asked him about them, so I can't be sure.

Anyway, I go and talk to him like the messages have been saying, and he asks me what I think of Matt Nelson.

"I think he's very dangerous," I replied. "I think he might even be a killer."

"Thank God," he said, "even most of the others on the forum seem to be taken in by his magic," he answered.

Now, I ain't no fool, and I haven't believed in magic since the night when I was seven and Santa's britches fell down when he was bringing in my presents and I saw he was wearing my Pa's boxers, but I could see he meant it.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's the Antichrist, Dave."

Chapter 20

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part six

The Third Wazir's Tale

O great my Shaykh, thou hast heard from thy grey-bearded, wizened Wazir of the creation of the world by Allah, and of Iblis, a million curses be upon his head, and his wish to steal the cauldron which Allah hath placed in the centre of the world. And thou hast heard from thy smooth-faced young Wazir of the fate that awaits men when they attempt to evade the destiny which Allah (all praise be unto him!) has for them.

But now thou must learn what that destiny means for all men. I tell thee this in sorrow, for no man should know the future, but thou art my Shaykh, and I must do thy bidding.

Thou hast been told, O my Shaykh, of the end of days, which cometh when Allah will it (though *inshallah* it shall not come for many days yet). And thou hast been told how in that time Isa[29] (*alayhis salam*[30]) will descend from the clouds and lead the righteous into battle against *Al-Masḥ ad-Dajjāl*[31], and how the righteous will defeat the *Dajjāl,* the one-eyed liar, and how the followers of the *Dajjāl* shall perish with one breath from Isa, and that this will happen before *Qiyamat*[32].

And all this shall be true, if Allah wills it, for it is in the *hadiths,* and no man can dispute their truth. Yet this is not all of the truth, for only Allah (a thousand thousand blessings unto him) knows the whole truth.

For there will be in those end times those who are neither the unrighteous followers of the *Dajjāl* nor the righteous. How this can be I know not – for one who is not righteous is unrighteous, and one who is not unrighteous is righteous – yet so it is said, and I cannot deny it.

And it hath reached me, O my Shaykh, that in those times there shall be one who is slave to a prince of the East, Abdillah by name, and that he shall go unto his master, and he shall speak unto him.[33]

"O my prince, thou art fair and just, yet I seek my freedom, for all can see that the end times are approaching, and I wish not to enter *Jannat* as a slave, but as a free man."

And the prince, who shall be a wise and fair ruler like unto Haroun al-Raschid himself, shall say to Abdillah, “My slave, thou hast served me well lo these many years, and thou shalt have thy freedom, if thou canst but bring me the head of a djinn, cleft from its body, that I may present it to Isa (*alayhis salam*) on *Qiyamat,* and present it unto him as evidence of my good faith, that I have served Allah well.”

Abdillah the slave will say unto the prince then “O my prince, how can I do such a thing? For all know that the djinn are like unto fire, and one can no more cut fire in twain with a scimitar than one can build a castle out of air or drink the sands of the desert.”

But the prince will say unto Abdillah “Thou hast heard my will, and thou shalt obey me, for only Allah is all-merciful, and my mercy shall turn to wrath should thou disobey one who hath granted you the great boon of freedom for which all men long. Bring me the head before one year and one day is up, and freedom shall be thine. But if thou should fail at this task, and I have no head to show unto Isa (*alayhis salam*), then thine own head shall take the place of that of the djinn.”

And Abdillah shall then leave the presence of the prince, and bid farewell to his wives and children, and he shall enter the desert. And a year and a day later, he shall return, bearing with him the head of a djinn on a silver platter.

And the prince will look on with amazement, for the head on that platter shall burn with a flame brighter than the sun, though there shall be no fuel for the fire to consume. And though the fire shall burn, yet it shall not fade or dim, and shall always remain in the shape of a head.

And the prince shall kiss Abdillah’s hands, and shall say unto him “O my good and faithful servant! Thou hast served me well and truly, and hast earned thy freedom, which I grant thee gladly and with full and gladsome heart! Yet tell me, O newly free, how it is that thou couldst overpower a being of such fearsome aspect? For I can no more gaze upon such a fierce and fiery countenance than I could gaze upon the sun itself. What gifts did Allah, to whom all praise must go, bestow upon thee that thou could perform such a task?”

And hearing this, Abdillah will begin his tale.

Chapter 21

From the *Sunday Herald*, 12th February

Man of the Moment

Rachel Edwards

A week ago, after his dismal fifth-place showing in the Nevada caucus, all the pundits and talking heads were predicting that Matt Nelson would be pulling out of the Presidential race some time this week, and giving his backing to Vice-President Gribbin.

I know I've used the "week is a long time in politics" cliché a lot in these columns, but sometimes it seems that even a day is an eternity.

For those who haven't been paying attention, this time last week (just after the deadline for my last column, because the universe hates me), the Vice-President's wife filed for divorce, after he got her sister pregnant. He's now pulled out (possibly something he should have learned to do earlier) and is only remaining Veep because it would cause more bad publicity to fire him than to just keep him out of the spotlight and pretend he doesn't exist for the next eight months.

Gribbin hasn't given any of the candidates his endorsement, of course – none of them want it – but his supporters have mostly split evenly between Ted O'Brien and Nelson, splitting roughly on "pragmatist" versus "idealist" lines.

And this couldn't have come at a better time for Nelson. He was always likely to win Tuesday's Minnesota caucus of course – he's the junior senator for the state, and always proudly says he's a member of the Democratic *Farm-Labor* party (much like the Co-Operative party affiliates with Labour in the UK, the DFL affiliates with the Democrats in Minnesota, but is technically a separate party). But after Gribbin dropped out, Nelson got a stunning 60% of the vote, instantly putting him back in the running.

He didn't do so well in conservative Missouri, coming third, but he also managed to scrape a win in Ohio, another Midwestern state, although he only came one percent ahead of Rick Lehman, who had been expected to win there easily because he's the only one of the candidates who will crawl sycophantically to the religious right.

So now, all of a sudden, far from being a shoo-in for Gribbin, with the other candidates standing in hopes of either getting the vice-presidential nomination (Lehman), preparing the ground for a run in four or eight years' time (O'Brien) or…well, nobody knows what Nelson expected to actually achieve with his campaign except Nelson himself, and he's not telling…as I say, instead of this race being a foregone conclusion, there's now a genuine sense of uncertainty. This is now a three-way race, and any one of the three could win.

Frankly, I don't think it's going to be Lehman. Lehman is popular among the Blue Dogs and the NDC, who have had a disproportionate influence in selecting past candidates, but those groups are increasingly being marginalised as DINOs in the party itself, and the general sense in the party is that they have to tack left in order to pick up the votes of all the formerly-disenfranchised new voters that haven't been a factor in previous elections. Lehman's only real way to get the candidacy would have been on the back of a popular President, as Veep. That now looks extremely unlikely. Lehman simply isn't popular enough among the general public, most of whom think of him as being a slimy little rat-faced man who would sell out his principles, if he had any, for a dollar. The fact that he's always voted with the majority in the Senate whether that majority is Republican or Democrat tends to suggest they're right.

So that means the choice is between Ted O'Brien and Matt Nelson, and that isn't a sentence I ever thought I'd be typing.

Ted O'Brien has to be the favourite, of course. He's a long-serving, popular, senator with a strong constituency, but one who appeals to all wings of the party and can win over moderate Republicans without compromising on the party's core values. He's a friendly-looking old man who seems like everyone's favourite uncle, and he's popular both with the old money East Coasters who give big donations to the party, and with the union members he's so often defended in the Senate.

Any other election year, I think it would be crazy to even consider that anyone else could win the nomination. But there are all those new voters to consider, and one simple fact that may swing the election. Ted O'Brien is, and always has been, a huge proponent of the war on drugs. His son died of an overdose just after the 1980 election, and as a result O'Brien tacked hard to the right on the subject, becoming a major figure in the Reagan-era "Just Say No" campaign. Many of the new voters – an actual majority of them – served time for drugs offences, and even the bulk of the Democratic base is

now made up of people from the post-Boomer generations, for whom drugs are part of everyday life, and for whom campaigning against drug use, at least use of soft drugs, seems as quixotic as the old evangelists who still preach against the dangers of rock music and Dungeons and Dragons.

So there are three million potential voters out there who are going to be inclined to vote against Ted O'Brien out of general principle, and quite a few more who are not going to be quite as enthusiastic about him as they otherwise would have been, because they want to be able to keep on smoking the odd joint without fear of a ten year jail sentence. (That's the difference between a hardliner on drugs on the Democrat side and one on the Republican side, incidentally. O'Brien "only" wants to send dope smokers to prison for ten years without parole. The Republicans have seriously suggested the death penalty for dealing, on multiple occasions).

Not only that, but since the issue has become a hot-button one, it means that O'Brien's volunteer base has dropped. A *lot* of Democratic support comes from the black churches, and while none of them support drug use, nor do they support what amounts to a war on young black men, which is what the "drug war" is, in effect.

People in Britain don't really know just how tied in the drug war is with race and with the right to bear arms, so to bring you up to speed, in America, as we all know, the police are armed. We all also know that the general public are armed over there, too.

What you probably don't know is that the time when the police in America are most at risk of being shot is when they've pulled a car over for a traffic stop. Unsurprisingly, the police are terrified of doing this, and so in the 60s there was a court case, the *Terry* case, the result of which was that if during a routine traffic stop a cop feels like he (or she, but it's usually a he) has any reason to feel scared of you, he can pat you down for a weapon. And if, during that pat-down, he finds any evidence of another crime, well, that's just too bad for you, even if he didn't have a warrant. In fact, this is the *only* way a cop is allowed to search you or your property without a warrant.

So if you're a police officer and you're under a lot of pressure to get a lot of drug arrests, what do you do? You start pulling cars over, saying "I'm scared you've got a weapon", and frisking people more or less at random.

Except you don't do it at random. Because you have to be able to

convince a jury that you were scared the person you frisked was going to pull a gun. And they're not going to believe that of the businessman in his suit and tie, even if he does have a $500 a week cocaine habit. But they will believe it of a young black man, even if he doesn't earn enough to own a gun at all.

So the end result of this is that in the USA, black people use illegal drugs at about the same rates as white people, but are ten times as likely to be jailed for using them.

So while the black churches don't endorse drug use, and in fact tend to be harder on it than any of the white churches, precisely because of the disproportionate damage it does to their communities, nor do they want to see another generation of their young men condemned to hard labour in what amounts to a continuation of slavery under another name. And so O'Brien, no matter how good he is on civil rights (and he's as good as an old white straight man can be on the matter), is never going to be their first choice.

So, amazing as it may sound, the Democratic nomination – and the Presidency? – may well be Matt Nelson's to lose. We live in interesting times…

Chapter 22

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

While I should not wish the reader to underestimate the seriousness of my purpose in my travels through Araby, for I had, after all, to track down a daemon whose very existence may prove inimical to all civilised life, that is not to say my travels were without their moments of levity. One such example may prove illustrative.

My young associate Salman, while he was a Mussulman, was not the most pious of men. One might say he would say *nunc scripsi totum pro Machometo, da mihi potum*, save that he was illiterate, and so what time he saved by the lack of *scribere* he made up for in *bibere*.

While the criminal underclasses of which Salman was a part saw the prohibition of wine in the Holy Qu'ran as one to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance, this was not true of our travelling companions, who were pious as only those who live in the deserts of Araby can be. When one's life is at the mercy of one's God, as the lives of these men were daily, then one does not take His commandments lightly.

It happened that one day, one of the men from the caravan, a most pious and holy man, who we shall call Abdul as his name escapes me for the nonce, had to break from the group to scout ahead. He was gone for much of the day, and on his return he was in a most pitiable state, half-dead from thirst.

He explained, in gasping breaths, that his water-pouch had split without him realising, and had leaked his whole supply of water into the desert sands. He had gone seven or eight hours in the desert heat without so much as a sip of water, and only because he was such a hardy soul had he managed to survive long enough to return to the caravan.

Now, it so happened that of the group who rode up to meet him on his return, only Salman was carrying his water-pouch, and so the thirsty man was naturally desirous that Salman should relinquish it into his temporary possession, to help him slake the thirst which was torturing him so.

Salman, though, seemed curiously reluctant to yield the pouch, and it

had to be wrested from him and given to Abdul.

The reasons for Salman's reluctance were soon apparent, as Abdul took two or three great swallows from the pouch, before handing it back and saying "Brother, what is this? This is not water!"

Salman looked guilty, and one of the other members of our little company took the pouch and sniffed, and then said "This is wine! What evil is this, that you would give *haram* filth to our brother? !"

Salman then replied "Wine? I do not drink wine! There is a terrible mistake here, my brother! I would not allow such filth into my pouch!"

But naturally, the other members of the caravan did not believe him, and it was quickly resolved that Salman would be ejected from the caravan and made to face the desert alone, where he would no doubt die of thirst, and soon.

I had to think quickly, and save the life of my servant, for though young Salman was a ruffian, he was nonetheless my bondsman, and I had a feudal duty to him, of a kind which few in these degraded days truly understand.

I fell to my knees and shouted "Praise be unto Allah! It is a miracle!"

The Shaykh of the caravan looked at me quizzically and said "What do you mean, my brother?"

"O my brother," I said to the Shaykh, "you know that Allah is all-merciful, and that what is *haram* for the well may not be so for the infirm. Thus while all good Muslims have to observe the fast of *Ramadan*, the sick, the elderly, and small children do not have to observe this fast."

"Yes, I know that, of course."

"Well, among the Christians it is said that wine has revivifying properties, that it can help a sick man to heal. So may it not be that while wine is *haram* to the healthy, it might be *halal* for a man who is dying of thirst, that he may recover the quicker? I am no scholar of the law, but this would seem to me to be the case. Certainly Allah the all-merciful would not wish brother Abdul to suffer."

"That does make sense. Certainly we should not punish our brother for his transgression in drinking this wine, for he intended no wrong. But that does not explain how Salman's pouch came to contain such filth."

"O my brother, do you not see? Do you not remember that it is told of

the *Hazrat* Isa (*Alahis Salaam*) that he turned water into wine? (For this was before the Prophet Muhammed, Peace Be Upon Him, commanded that wine be *haram*). It is said of him by the Christians, but the Holy Qu'ran does not deny that it is so."

"So…"

"So clearly Allah the All-Merciful has taken mercy upon our brother Abdul, and has turned the water in brother Salman's pouch into wine, that brother Abdul may more quickly recover from his ordeal."

The Shaykh looked sceptical about this, so I quickly added "Or do you think that such a feat is beyond the abilities of Allah?"

"No," replied the Shaykh, "of course, Allah can do anything he wishes, for he is Allah the all-mighty!"

"Then we are agreed, then? Brother Salman's water has turned miraculously into wine, to cure our brother Abdul. But of course we must pour the rest away, and replace it with pure fresh water, now brother Abdul is recovered."

Salman looked crestfallen at this, but the Shaykh nodded his acquiescence, the wine was poured away, and Salman was allowed to continue travelling with the caravan.

And Salman and I celebrated his reprieve that night with the whisky I had secreted in a hip-flask about my person.

Chapter 23

Hello, it's me again, Shifty. I thought I'd take this opportunity to break in to the narrative because…well, frankly, in the original book, this was a verbatim report of one of Matt Nelson's campaign speeches. And having lived through all of this once already, I know there's nothing interesting going on here. Look, I'll let you read a paragraph or so of it:

> And that is the difference between me and my opponents. They're fine men, principled men. But they're political men, men of the old politics. And we need new ideas to face the new challenges the world is placing before us. If they have any new ideas, they're keeping them to themselves.

See what I mean? How incredibly dull. My story's much more interesting.

To understand anything about my story you need to know that Earth is…odd. It's simultaneously hugely important in universal history, and utterly inconsequential. It doesn't make sense.

Humans, you see, have always had this rather unique idea that they have these things called "souls" and "free will". They think of themselves as little bits of non-physical mind-stuff that just push their bodies around. They're wrong, of course – humans are just bags of meat following deterministic physical rules, like pretty much every other life-form in the universe.

But they've thought that for so long that when they discovered this, the natural result *should* have been to say "right, we're going to fix that", and turn themselves into non-corporeal beings of pure information, like me. It's the only way their history would have made any sense at all.

But they didn't do that. Instead, they just…stopped. They created artificial intelligences – which didn't self-improve and attain omnipotence, but just went around speaking pedantically and taking things a little too literally. They created faster-than-light travel – but didn't use it to create time loops which could carry out an infinite number of calculations in a finite amount of time, just travelled to other stars and set up sad little Galactic Empires. They continued dying, and growing old, and going mad…they did nothing of any importance after the early twenty-first century.

To any intelligent observer, there was only one reasonable conclusion –

someone had been fiddling with humanity's history. At best, it was just someone interfering, but at worst, their history had been usurped. Some other species was going around doing all the things that humanity would have done, while the humans were looking the other way. And to any intelligent observer, there were only a couple of possible options as to who that other species could be.

This meant that the Earth's unimportance became *vitally important*. You see, the War I told you about earlier is, in a sense, a war over possible conceptions of history, and if humanity became important in the grand scheme of things…well, maybe one side in the War would suddenly become rather less important. Or not important at all.

So I was assigned to Earth, by one of the sides in the War, just to keep an eye on it. Make sure nobody suddenly invented time-travel, for example. I wasn't stationed on Earth, as such – I was given a view of its whole timeline, and could travel to it in cases of emergency, but mostly what I did was observe the shape of its history.

And for the most part, that shape stayed pretty constant. There would be small changes – a minor war in some Imperial outpost in 2540, twenty years of peace in the middle of what was meant to be a thirty-year war in the twentieth century, that sort of thing – which would suggest the interference of the Wartime powers or some rogue elements, but basically human history consists of an exponential curve until some time in the first couple of decades of the twenty-first century, and then it flattens almost completely until the end of history. The odd wiggle isn't going to change that.

But then, Earth's history started to…*curve* a little. It was no longer flat at the start of the twenty-first century, but there was a very gentle upward slope. And the curve slowly became more pronounced. Obviously, someone was messing with time.

The question was – who?

Neither of the two warring sides in the War would do it, obviously – or at least, not again. Their own positions were too fragile. It was some third party.

Now, I've spent a little time on Earth in the past, and so I thought the best thing to do would be to get down there and investigate. The problem is, it's rather a difficult planet to remain inconspicuous on.

None of the really *major* powers would have anything to do with the place, you understand – it's far too dangerous to mess around with – but there are all sorts of minor powers who keep trying to take over, in order to make themselves look important on the Universal stage. There are at least three rival Faction Paradox groups there, all unaware of each other; one of the major countries there has a government that's succumbed entirely to Celestis influence; and there are so many attempts by alien powers to invade that one can barely materialise on the planet without being fought over by five different covert paramilitary organisations, wanting everything from one's scientific advice to one's internal organs.

But discretion is my middle name – or at least I can say that now, since nobody knows what my first or last names were, to contradict me – and so I just about managed to get myself set up with a cover identity as a newspaper reporter, assigned to a local political campaign. This subterfuge was less arbitrary than it might seem. The problems we were seeing with Earth's history weren't minor ones, and for all that I've argued in the past that the fall of every sparrow affects the whole history of spacetime, that's not *strictly* true.

Of course, everyone's life is important, and everyone can make a difference, but it's much easier to make a difference if you have the sole control of a bloody huge arsenal of nuclear weapons that can blow up the planet five times over, as well as access to a secret cache of xenotechnological artefacts that, if you press the wrong button, could conjure up memetophagic creatures that could neatly empty the planet of every idea any of its inhabitants had ever had, leaving the physical aspects of the planet untouched while removing all its culture in a femtosecond.

This is not to argue for the Great Man view of history – rather the opposite. The Great Man tends to have rather little impact on the cosmic scale, but the Bloody Stupid Man can twist the whole history of the multiverse around just by saying the wrong word to the wrong person at the wrong time. And anyone who is at all familiar with the history of Earth knows that all too often Bloody Stupid Men have been put into positions where they had the power to destroy the entire sapient population of the planet. I suspected this was one of those times.

The most likely place for the deviations in history to be happening was in a country known as the United States of America. It wasn't the *only* power in the world – there were four or five worth bothering about – but most of the rest were either run on fairly democratic lines (in that the

people were given some sort of real choice as to who was going to impose a set of arbitrary, idiotic rules upon them, and could get rid of the idiot in charge and replace him with an idiot who would impose a completely different set of rules), or were run by vicious gerontocracies whose middle echelons had no compunctions about assassinating those at the top should they do anything to destabilise the country. The USA though was run on supposedly democratic lines, but in practice the people were given a choice between two near-identical potential dictators, and when on the very few occasions they chose someone who turned out not to have precisely the agenda that the people at the top wanted to propagate, they were either killed off or turfed out at the first opportunity.

So in the USA, almost uniquely on the Earth, the intelligence and political acumen of a candidate for the top position made almost no difference. And this meant that the power to destroy, if not the planet then a substantial fraction of the life upon it, could be given to any idiot who was willing to say the right words. It's almost as if these people had never heard the phrase "single point of failure".

So I was to look for someone interfering in an American election. This was harder than it appeared. There was at least one election around this time that had so many different parties interfering with it that not only did the wrong man get elected, a whole chunk of the continuum remained in a multivalued state for many months. But after a few months' investigation, I realised that the interferences with that particular election mostly cancelled each other out. There were a few minor differences – a war that shouldn't have happened, an economic slump that lasted a little longer than it otherwise should – but nothing that stood out as something that could have incalculable consequences for the timeline.

But not long after, one election did stand out. If you become as sensitive to the patterns in time and history as those of us who have worked for the Wartime powers are, you can see how the same stories recur time and again. And in the USA, there's one that happened at least four times in the century before this – the maverick who comes from within one of the major parties, but who doesn't fit into them particularly well. He builds up a following from the disenfranchised, the radicals, and those who want to see a totally new way of doing things.

And then he loses.

But this one hadn't lost. He'd won the election.

That shouldn't have happened. It made no sense. That election was meant to have been won by a moderate, centrist Republican, who campaigned on the issue of campaign finance reform but did absolutely nothing about it once he got into office. That's what anyone who could see the patterns could have told you. Even a non-time-sensitive could have told you that.

So now I knew my time and place, the rest was easy for a dashing, suave hero such as myself. Simply turn up, volunteer for the campaign, show them how utterly brilliant I am, get invited into the inner sanctum, unmask the villain of the piece, "Curses, you have foiled my evil plan!" and home in time for tea. I've done it a million times before, and I know the routine.

And, indeed, that's how it went, right up until the end.

I did, indeed, manage to inveigle myself in the campaign, and I discovered what the plot was. And it was a big one.

You see, there's this…object isn't the right word…there's an absence called the caldera, and it's what gives the Great Houses (you remember them?) their power over the course of history. It's right at the centre of their world.

Now, this caldera distorts history in a particular, noticeable way, and one of the things you notice about the Earth, if you look at it closely, is that up to the early twenty-first century, its history seems to be distorted in precisely that way, as if it had something very like the caldera at its own centre. So much so that those of a horribly suspicious turn of mind would suspect that it *did* have the caldera at its centre, and that a certain bunch of snooty immortals had half-inched it, and with it the destiny of humanity, and usurped humanity's rightful place in history while the humans weren't looking.

You know, *if* we were being cynical.

And it seems that the plot, from someone inside the Nelson organisation, was to get their puppet into the presidency, then sponsor a massive drilling operation to get whatever was at the centre of the Earth out.

And if we were being even more cynical, then we could say that that would mean that the person behind the plot was going to be able to get the caldera before the Great Houses managed to, and would usurp the Houses'

place in history and rewrite the whole of time in their own image.

So I'd figured out the evil plan, and all that remained was to do the "*enter the villain's inner sanctum, expose them, accept the thanks of a grateful people*" part of it. I was expecting to maybe get tied up and have to escape using a trick I'd learned from Houdini, to talk an evil robot into exploding with a logic paradox, to have to convince the villain's henchmen to change their loyalties when they realised the enormity of the plot they were involved in, and all the other things that are my stock in trade.

Instead, though, the villain just looked at me, and blinked. And I found myself written out of history.

Oops.

Chapter 24

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part seven

The Third Wazir's Tale, continued

O great my Prince (Abdillah will say), I needed no special gift to smite the head of the djinn from its body, for Allah gives courage and strength to all men who wish to serve him. This I knew before I began my quest, for had I not already the courage to ask you for my freedom?

So I needed no special gifts, except the knowledge of where a djinn might be found, for all know that the djinn hide from the gaze of man, except when they seek to corrupt and destroy, for they wish also to be hidden from the wrath of Allah (a million praises unto him), and they are *kaffirs* and believe foolishly that if they cannot be seen by man nor can they be seen by Allah the all-seeing.

So I prayed to Allah that he might give me guidance, then took I my sword, my cloak, my water-bottle, and a loaf of bread, and I ventured forth.

First, O my Prince, I visited the wise-woman.

"O wise-woman," saith I, "tell me where I may find the djinn, that I may remove his head, and by serving Allah gain my freedom from man."

"O slave," quoth the wise one, "I cannot help thee, for I am old and my memory is poor, and cold am I in these dark winter nights."

Hearing this, took I my cloak, and placed it on her shoulders, that she might be warmed by it (for in truth the cold of winter may freeze the memories of the elderly).

"O kind and gentle slave," saith the woman, "a thousand blessings be unto thee! I know not where thou shalt find a djinn, for I am old and do not travel, but if thou shouldst walk to the place where once was a stream, but where now no water doth flow, thou shalt find encased in clay a frog. The frog knows much of the world, for he talketh to the fish that swim from river to sea. But I warn you, no sword of metal shall cut a djinn."

So thanking her I made my way to the dry stream, and in the clay did I find a frog.

“O frog,” saith I, “tell me where I may find the djinn, that I may remove his head, and by serving Allah gain my freedom from man.”

“O slave,” quoth the frog, “I cannot help thee, for the stream has been dry these many months, and I have a great thirst upon me.”

Hearing this, took I my water bottle, and bade the frog to drink (for in truth the stream was very dry, and the frog did have a great thirst).

“O kind and gentle slave,” saith the frog, “a thousand blessings be unto thee! I know not where thou shalt find a djinn, for the heat of the djinn is so strong that it would kill me were I to venture into its presence, but if thou shouldst walk to the top of the mountain, there shalt thou find an eagle. The eagle with its piercing eye knows the hiding place of all things. Surely he shall help you find your djinn. But I warn you, no sword of metal shall cut a djinn.”

So thanking him, I made my way to the top of the mountain, and at the top of the mountain did I find the eagle.

“O eagle,” saith I, “tell me where I may find the djinn, that I may remove his head, and by serving Allah gain my freedom from man.”

“O slave,” quoth the eagle, “I cannot help thee, for it is winter, and all the running beasts of the field do sleep in their burrows, and when the beasts are in their burrows I have no food, and I hunger.”

Hearing this, took I my bread, and bade the eagle to eat (for in truth the mice and voles and other scurrying creatures were asleep, and the eagle did have a great hunger).

“O kind and gentle slave,” saith the eagle, “a thousand blessings be unto thee! To find your djinn, venture to the foot of this mountain, where shalt thou find a cave, and in that cave thou shalt find the djinn. But I warn you, no sword of metal shall cut a djinn.”

So thanking the eagle, I made my way to the foot of the mountain, and there did I see a cave, and into that cave did I venture, though it was dark as a camel’s heart.

Yet when I had made my way a dozen times a dozen paces into the cave, there came a great brightness like unto the sun, and I did see before me the djinn. And the djinn was a fearsome creature indeed, as tall as three men and as wide as two.

I drew my sword and thrust it towards the terrifying apparition, but – O

horror compounded upon horror! – so hot was the fire of the djinn that my sword turned to water as it touched the monster, and I was left holding naught but the pommel.

I turned and ran, in great despair, for the wise woman, the frog, and the eagle had spoken true – no sword of metal could harm such a creature.

I left the cave, and made my way toward the nearest village, and I wept sore, for I had neither food, nor drink, nor covering, nor weapon. I could not win my freedom, and I would surely die.

But I did meet on the path an old man, and he did speak to me.

Quoth the old man "O my little brother, why dost thou weep?"

And I gazed at the man in astonishment, knowing he was a messenger sent from Allah (unlimited blessings be upon him), for the man only had one arm, but his shadow had two.

Chapter 25

From the *Sunday Herald*, 26th August

The Third Man

Rachel Edwards

Nobody could have predicted when the Democratic National Convention started on Tuesday that by Thursday America would have seen its third – and from the looks of things right at this second, most popular – party be created, let alone that its candidate would be the man who, only four days ago, looked certain to win the Democratic nomination for President.

Matt Nelson came into the Convention with the most delegates, with the momentum behind him, and with the most liberal members of the party – what one wag referred to as "the Democratic wing of the Democratic party" – backing him all the way. Yet he left, two days later, as the candidate for the newly formed Radical Party, while Senator O'Brien, who had been third throughout the race, was the Democratic nominee, with Rick Lehman, the ultra-right-winger, as O'Brien's running mate.

To understand how this happened, one has to understand the way the Democratic Party actually works. Like British political parties, it represents a broad spectrum of political interests, in this case ranging from people who would, to our eyes, seem not far from Nazis but who aren't *quite* as stupid as the typical Republican voter to, at the other extreme, people who would be quite at home in the SWP. The bulk of the party think of themselves as "liberal" but are actually moderately social-democratic in their economic thinking and Burkean conservatives when it comes to social matters. They're much, much better than the Republicans, who would for the most part bring back the death penalty for being black, but they'd mostly fit quite comfortably into the liberal wing of the Tories.

Naturally, this means that, more than most parties, they have to compromise. Usually, this involves throwing out the concerns of the left wing of the party as "impractical" – after all, where else are they going to go in a two-party system? – and focussing with laser-like precision on appealing as hard as they can to those voters right in the centre.

But the candidate still, ultimately, has to get past the active membership

in order to get the nomination in the first place. And the active membership tends more towards the left. And so the normal process is for the potential candidate, in the early stages, to make a great play of his liberal credentials, talking about how he once had a black friend, or how he's all in favour of the nice kind of homosexual that you see on sitcoms, the ones who don't have boyfriends or mention their sexuality in polite company. The more daring ones may even mention unions, or raising taxes.

But then, as soon as they've got enough delegates to secure the nomination, the accepted practice is to tack right as hard as possible as quickly as possible, in order to secure the five undecided voters who sit right in the centre ground and whose views are supposedly crucial to actually winning the election. The approval of the tiny number of swing voters is infinitely more important, in this view, than the support of the people who are already on your side. Then, on election day itself, you switch again and start trying desperately to get as many of your strongest supporters out and voting as you can. It's a totally insane process, and the only thing it has going for it is that so far it seems to have worked, as far as anyone can tell.

It has the advantage of encouraging tribalism (a term I don't like to use, as those who actually live in tribes tend not to behave in that manner, but I don't know of a better one), so if you're a candidate you know who your voters are, because the other side's rhetoric is so extreme that anyone even vaguely on the left could never support the Republican candidate (it doesn't really work the other way round, because the Democrats don't really do extremes, but the Republicans definitely do). But it has the disadvantage of disenfranchising anyone who actually holds a strong opinion about anything.

Now, both O'Brien and Lehman are safe choices, from this point of view. Both of them would, if elected, govern "moderately" and "sensibly", by sticking to the social and economic orthodoxies that have ruled American politics since 1980. Nelson, on the other hand, is "dangerous", precisely because he wouldn't.

And he said as much in his concession speech.

In the angriest speech I've ever heard from an American politician, he denounced the convention as corrupt. And by British standards it was. The super-delegates, who are meant to go with the majority, decided to back O'Brien *en masse*. That wasn't yet enough to give O'Brien the victory, but then he made Lehman his running mate, Lehman's delegates went over to

O'Brien (even though Lehman's an arch-DINO while O'Brien is definitely a liberal by US standards, if not by UK ones), and all of a sudden O'Brien, who'd been in third place coming into the convention, had the nomination sewn up.

And Matt Nelson wasn't having any of this. His concession speech has already had over a million views on YouTube as I type this, and is likely to go down in American history as, if not the best speech ever written, certainly the angriest speech ever delivered by a major political figure.

"No, I am not going to give a concession speech, because I do not concede. I do not concede that a handful of so-called super-delegates and a back room deal gets to outvote the American people. I do not concede that. I will never concede that. I do not concede that the American people deserve only a choice between a Republican who wants to take us back to the nineteenth century and a Democrat who wants to take us back to the nineteen sixties. I do not concede that. I will never concede that. I do not concede that the only way to make any kind of progress in this country is now to caucus with people who have devoted the last year to destroying my reputation and destroying the very possibility of change in this nation. I do not concede that. I will never concede that."

"There is only one thing I will concede, and that is that the Democratic Party is no longer worthy of the name. When the Presidential nominee is the man who came third in the primaries, then that is no democracy. That I will concede. So the only thing I will concede to those people, to O'Brien and Lehman, is this party. And from this day forth, I am campaigning not for the Democratic Presidential nomination, but as Radical Party candidate for President of the United States. Those of you who wish to continue fighting for real change are welcome to join me."

Within hours, Nelson's candidacy had been endorsed by a host of minor parties – both the Greens and the Libertarians have decided to pull their own candidates and get behind Nelson. The Chairman of the Libertarian Party stated "While we have some real concerns with Matt Nelson's high-tax, high-spend economics, the fact is that on all the important social issues – the war in the Middle East, the stupid and costly War on Some Drugs, First Amendment issues – he is the most prominent major candidate in decades to take a Libertarian stance. We hope that we can persuade him to revise his economic stances, but there is no better candidate out there with a real chance of winning."

In return for this endorsement, and as a show of bi-partisanship, Nelson

has agreed to take on Independent Congresswoman Lola Denison as his Vice-Presidential running mate. Denison was originally elected as a Republican, but has consistently taken a Libertarian stance on most issues, and has been castigated by the Republican grassroots as a RINO for her centrist positioning, to the point where she left the party before the last election and got re-elected as an independent. While she's far to the right of Nelson, she's a reasonably sensible centrist, and with luck she won't ever be in a position to do any damage.

Denison's own statement was brief and to the point: "Both Matt Nelson and myself agree that good government is far more important than which party is in charge. I guarantee that if the American people elect Matt Nelson and myself, the world will be changed forever, and for the better."

So for the first time in a generation, with a little over two months to go before polling day, the American people are being given a real, distinct, set of choices. Will Matt Nelson win over the progressive vote, or will he, as Ted O'Brien is already claiming, act as a spoiler and allow the Republicans to win the Presidency? Only time, and the American people, will tell.

Chapter 26

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

Of course, I should not have wished to travel with a caravan at all, had there not been the possibility of dangers that could not be tackled alone. While I am as fond as any man of the company of my fellows, I am, nonetheless, more akin to the leopard who hunts alone than to the wolf or lion who live in their packs.

A long spell in even the most congenial company can pall, as one soon begins to notice the idiosyncratic behaviours of one's companion – for every man has those twitches, tics, or figures of speech which may seem charming when dining at the Ritz, from which one knows one can escape at a moment's notice, but which when one knows one has to endure them for a length of time become an irritant worse than the fabled Chinese water torture.

Thus you may imagine that by this point the enforced company of my fellow man was becoming nigh intolerable. Since departing London many months earlier, I had been, first, on board ship, surrounded by my fellow passengers, then in an Arabic port, where all of humanity seemed to congregate, and now I was in a caravan where not only did I have to tolerate the constant noise and stink of that creature we laughingly claim was fashioned in the shape of God, but I had to do so while, at all times, keeping up the pretence that I was Mirzah Abdullah the *Bushri*, rather than the English soldier I am.

This constant company became so intolerable to me that presently I was compelled to contrive some plausible story, by means of which I could be given the pretext to engage one of my fellow travellers in the pugilistic arts, in hope of thereby not only punishing one for his vexatiousness, but also relieving some of the tedium which a long desert journey invariably brings.

But what could this pretext be? Were I wishing to fight another Englishman, the problem would be simple. I could place some small belonging of mine in his possession and accuse him of theft, or were I not willing to risk the loss of my property, I could accuse him of attempting to persuade me into those acts for which Sodom was destroyed. Either

accusation could swiftly give rise to a fist-fight, thus allowing me to have my sport and for honour to be restored.

Such accusations, however, would not be so welcome among the Arab tribespeople. Amongst those with whom I was travelling, both theft and the unmentionable vices would have resulted, not in honourable combat between equals, but in a sudden and bloody execution. While I had on numerous occasions wished such deaths upon many of my fellows, especially one young man, Ali, whose screams from the nightmares that plagued him nightly ensured that he was the only man in the caravan to get a full night's sleep, I could not in all conscience cause such an event, especially as it would not even have the desired effect of allowing me my boxing practice.

The plan that eventually came to mind was simplicity itself. I informed Salman of my intentions, and the next morning, over a breakfast of goat's milk and bread, he spoke up.

"*Hajji* Abdullah," he addressed me by the title to which my pilgrimage to Meccah had entitled me, "are goats more pleasant to copulate with than women?"

I feigned incredulity at this question. "What on earth makes you think that a man such as I would know such a thing, boy?"

"But *Hajji*," he replied, his face a picture of innocence "Ali told me that you had told him a woman for necessity, a boy for pleasure, but a goat for ecstasy'. Was Ali teasing me, then?"

At this, I rose up and charged at Ali, who was already protesting his innocence, but in vain.

A circle quickly formed around us, as I used my larger stature to knock the boy to the floor, hitting him in the chest with my shoulder, and then once he was down aiming a few well-chosen blows with my sandals[34].

He staggered to his feet, and in response I let him have three blows to the stomach, in quick succession, then grabbed his beard, and tugged his head down while bringing my knee up, the two meeting sharply.

Upon hearing a crack, and the yell he let out in response, I stepped backwards.

"Do you still think I copulate with goats?" I roared at the lad, who fell down and lay prostrate on the floor.

"*Hajji*, I would never say such a thing," he whimpered, pathetically, "not in a thousand times a thousand years would I ever accuse you of such a thing."

I gazed round at the assembled throng. "You all heard that, didn't you?" I shouted. "He admits it was a falsehood. Honour is now satisfied, but woe betide any man who makes false accusations against me. Next time, I shall not be so merciful!"

I then clasped the boy's hand and assisted him to his feet.

"You fought well," I told him. In truth, he had fought like a mewling pansy, but one should always be magnanimous in victory. It is always best, anyway, to convince bystanders that any opponent is a ferocious foe, for then they will be all the more impressed by the victory. "Come, eat with me."

I took Ali to sit with Salman and myself, gave him some of my bread, and shared many a joke with him that morning, now that my thirst for the fight had been sated.

And from that night on, Ali never had another nightmare, and we all slept soundly for the remainder of the journey.

Chapter 27

Now, I nearly burst out laughing then, but I didn't because Bill was a good guy, and he'd bought the beers, and we all have our crazy ideas. But he could tell I didn't believe him.

"Have you read the Bible?" he asked me. "Really read it, I mean."

"Not really," I replied, "I mean, I'm a Christian of course, and I go to church regular, but I figure I'll let the Pastor do the reading, and he can tell me what's important. That's what he's there for."

So Bill told me about the Book of Revelation, and how, in it, it says that the Antichrist will come from Rome (and this means he'll be a Roman Catholic, like Nelson is), and that he'll be a politician and take over America, and that he'll try to stop all the wars by uniting all the world, and how he'll make us all swear allegiance to him, rather than to God and the flag, and he'll take our guns away.

Well, I wasn't convinced. I mean, all that stuff may be in the Bible, but it didn't mean that Matt Nelson himself was the Antichrist, did it?

Bill admitted that he could be wrong, but he asked if I wanted to take that chance. Well, when he put it like that I was a little worried, but it's hard to think that something like that's really happening, you know? Preachers can talk about the end of the world all they like, but it never really felt like the world was really going to end.

Bill said he understood that, but that I should think about it, and let him know if I wanted to know more.

That night I did go home and have a look through the Book of Revelation, but to be honest I couldn't make head nor tail of it at first. I couldn't find anything about the Antichrist in there at all, or anything else, neither. I'm not the biggest reader in the world, and I guess I just didn't understand it all that well at first. Of course now I do, but back then it didn't seem to make much sense.

But then, I started seeing more messages *in the Bible*. Now, that was powerful, to me. If you can change the words of the Bible, then that means you must be God, right? The Bible is God's word, and only God can change God's word – I may not know much, but I know that.

And the messages I started seeing were all saying the same things.

They were saying “Talk to Bill. The Bible isn’t the book you need to be reading now, there’s another book which has the answers you’re looking for. Bill knows which one you need to read.”

So, of course, I called Bill up, and said to him “Bill, I’m told there’s a book you have that I should be reading.”

Bill sounds confused and says “What book?”

“I was told that you’d know which book, that the answers I’m looking for ain’t in the Bible, they’re in this other book.”

There was a very long pause then, like Bill was thinking of something.

“Who told you this?” he asks me.

“I can’t tell you that,” I say, remembering the way people had reacted when they’d seen me replying to the messages on the forum.

There’s an even longer silence, and then he says “We need to talk about this in person. Meet me at Perkins, tomorrow, seven in the morning.” Then he hangs up right away, without saying anything else.

Well, I drag my butt out of bed at six the next morning, and drive to Perkins, and wait for him there. I’ve eaten all my Tremendous Twelve and I’m on to my second pot of coffee by the time he gets there, at eight thirty, and I’m *pissed*.

“Sorry I got here so late,” he says to me, “I had to make it look like I wasn’t coming, in case anyone was listening to our phone call yesterday.”

“Who the hell would be listening to our phone calls?” I ask him, *real* pissed now. After all, I was the one who’d had to get out of bed at six A. M. while he’d strolled in an hour and a half late.

“All sorts of organisations,” he replies. “There are some you know nothing about, and it’s best for you if you stay ignorant of them. But I know for a fact that the CIA is tapping the phones of several of the people I’m working with.”

Now, this got me suspicious, because I know as well as anyone that the CIA doesn’t tap the phones of American citizens, but I said nothing, because, well, Bill knows a lot more than me about this kind of stuff, and I didn’t want to look like a fool in front of one of the few friends I had left. But I started wondering what kind of people would be worried about the CIA tapping their telephones, and I couldn’t think of anything good. It’s

not something you worry about, generally, if you're one of the good guys. At least, that's what I thought then.

"You're not some kind of Communist, are you?" I asked, because that was the first thing I could think of, that or a drug dealer, and Bill didn't look like no hippie to me.

He just laughed. He told me he was a member of this group. He didn't talk too much about it, but he said they had hidden secrets, that they knew things about the world that other people didn't. About who was really ruling the world. He said that some of them even had… well, he said they had magical powers, but I wasn't going to believe that, not for a second.

But he said that they'd decided, from what I'd told them, that I was special. Not just special, that I was the one who was going to save the world. I was going to be the one who would take back this country from the liberals and queers and abortionists and make it a safe place for good, decent, hard-working men again.

That didn't make a heck of a lot of sense to me. I mean, it sounded good – who *wouldn't* want to be the man who saved the whole world, you know? – but it didn't sound all that real to me. I mean, I'm just me, Dave Larsen. I fix people's cars, I don't fix the whole world…that sort of thing's for important people.

I told Bill this, and he said "But you *are* important, Dave. You know that book you were asking about?"

"Yeah," I said, "I remember you were going to ask your friends about if I could see it."

"Well, we've had a look, and we think you're *in* the book."

Well, you can imagine what I felt like then. I told him he was talking bu– I told him he was talking garbage, I weren't in any book.

He said yes, I was. I was in a book written hundreds of years before I was even born.

"But… that makes no sense," I said, "how can a book written before I was born have me in it?"

"Well," he says, "you believe in the Bible, don't you?"

"Sure I do. But I ain't in the Bible. I'd'a noticed."

"Well, yes, but you believe the Bible has predictions of the future in it,

don't you? It talks about the End Times, and they haven't happened yet."

"Well, yeah, the *Bible* has stuff in it predicting the future, but it's…well, it's the Bible. It's special."

"But you accept that at least one book has predictions in, right? So it's possible for a book to contain information about the future?"

"I…I guess so."

"Well, so why is it so hard to believe that one might have something in it about you?"

"Well, I'm…I'm just *me*, you know? I'm not special. I could understand if it had stuff in it about, like, the President or… I dunno… Elvis or someone. But why would any book have me in it?"

"Perhaps you're more special than you think. Perhaps God has a plan for you. You've heard in church about how God has a plan for us all, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but… " I was getting a little uncomfortable here, because I've never been much of one for religious talk. I know what I believe, but I've never pushed my beliefs on anyone else. Far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter if you're a Lutheran or a Catholic or a Baptist or whatever, we all believe in the same God, and he knows better than we do about the small details.

"I know, nobody likes all this God talk this early in the morning, and it's not even Sunday. Don't worry, I'm not going to get all preachy with you. I'm just trying to say… some books have power."

"OK. OK, yes, some books have prophecies in them and stuff. So what is this book?"

"You heard of the Arabian Nights?"

"You mean like Sindbad, Ali Baba, Aladdin, those Arabian Nights?"

"That's the one. But it's not just a collection of fairy tales. It's much more than that."

"I've never met any genies, and I don't have no flying carpet. What's this got to do with me?"

"Like I said, it's not just a collection of fairy tales. There's all sorts in there. There's Muslim stuff, and pornography, and all kinds of degenerate

shit I wouldn't let any kid go near. But there's also prophecies."

"Prophecies about me?"

"Not in the Arabian Nights itself, no. But there's a special extra book, *The Thousand and Second Night*, that almost nobody has ever read. And that book has that liberal piece of shit Nelson in it. And it has you in it. Or someone a lot like you."

"Are you serious?"

"I've never been more serious in my life. If I'm reading this book right, then I think you're going to save the world."

So he gives me this book, and I take it home and I read it. And I'm not sure I'm understanding it all right, because it's all in Olde Englishe thee thou thus talk, but one thing I get clear. There's this guy in the book who defeats a vampire, and the vampire's been killing young women, just like the ones who've been dying at Matt Nelson's campaign stops. And the vampire sounds a lot like Nelson. And the guy who kills him sounds a lot like me.

Chapter 28

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part eight

O my Prince, upon seeing this miracle of the one-armed man with the two-armed shadow, I knew that I was being vouchsafed a visitation from one of the angels of Jannat, for the humble form of the cripple was betrayed by the perfection of his shadow, and as all know no angel can hide his true nature from the righteous.

Yet knew I also that no angel will ever betray his nature by his words, for to do so would be to risk betrayal to the agents of the Shaytan (ten thousand times ten thousand curses be upon his filthy head!), and those angels that work the will of Allah (all praise be unto him) through the acts of man must do so in secret, that the Shaytan cannot turn the minds of men against them.

Knowing this, I spake not of the revelation that had come unto me, but simply said "O aged elder, I weep for I am bound to slay a djinn, else my life be forfeit, yet the djinn is impervious to any sword forged by man! I am bound by my honour to return to my prince and tell him of my failure, and he shall then take mine own head in place of that belonging to the djinn!"

And the old man did bow his head in thought, and having thought did raise it and say, "O little brother, thou hast spoken true when thou saist that the djinn can not be killed by swords forged by man, for the djinn is a creature of fire, and the sword is a thing of earth. A thing of earth can kill men, who are also made of earth, but as all know the fire consumes things of earth and turns them to air and water, and by them is harmed not."

"So then must I use a sword of fire to defeat the djinn? A flaming sword like unto those Allah has given to the angels?"

The old man shook his head. "No, for when fire meets fire, the two fires do not destroy each other, but become one larger fire, as all men know. No, for thy task no weapon of the elements will suffice."

Hearing this, I wept once more, for if no weapon even of Jannat could destroy a djinn, what hope had I of doing Allah's work and keeping mine own head?

Yet the old man bade me weep not. “O my little brother, thou shouldst rejoice, for today I shall give unto thee an weapon, the wielding of which shall let thee slay this beast of the Shaytan, and which none shall ever take from thee.”

Saying this, he took my hand, and did lead me to a nearby rock. And the rock did open up before me, and inside was a bright light like unto an hundred suns. And he did take me into the rock, though I shielded my eyes, for surely that light was the light of Allah himself. And I did hear an mighty roar, and the ancient one did take my hand again, and lead me whence I came, though I did cover my eyes.

The elder then spake, saying “Open thy eyes, O little brother, for thou art safe with me.” And I did open my eyes, and did see an wondrous room that could only be of Jannat itself, for there was an mighty vaulted ceiling, higher than ten men, and the room was fully five hundred paces long, and all was of surpassing beauty.

The elder led me to a crone of whom he spake – “O little brother, this is the Allah-mother”. I prostrated myself in terror, for surely this was Shekinah, the female aspect of Allah himself.

“Get up, boy,” spake the crone, “lest I pull thy gizzards out through thy anal passage and feed them to the crows.”

I raised myself to my feet, though I still averted my eyes from the sight of her majesty.

“O little brother,” said the one-armed elder, “thou wishest to defeat a creature of light and fire. The only sword which may defeat a creature of light is a sword of darkness. Thou art lucky indeed, for today the Allah-mother will bestow upon thee a shadow-sword.”

The Allah-mother placed before me a sword, and bade me retrieve it, not with mine hand, but with the hand of mine shadow. And lo! Miracle of miracles, my shadow-hand took the sword, and my shadow became armed, though I bore no sword myself.

The elder then returned me to the cave from whence he had retrieved me, though I begged to be allowed to remain in the glory of Jannat. And he did return to the rock, and I did hear an sound like unto the screams of the damned in Jahannam, and the rock was no more.

I ventured into the cave once more, but the shadows and darkness had no more power to affright me, for I knew that I could control the darkness,

and turn it against the djinn.

And so it proved, for the djinn came forth again, with a blazing light which nigh blinded me with its brightness. Yet in that light I could see my shadow, so I swung my arm towards the foul creature's neck as before, and the shadow-sword did cleft its head from its neck, and the djinn fell silent.

Chapter 29

From *radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com*, 10th September

OK, so this entry is flocked, and you don't tell *anyone* what you're reading here, right? This is very tightly filtered, so if it gets out I *will* know who's done it.

I'm starting to worry about this campaign. Not that Matt might not get the Presidency, but that he might actually win it.

I haven't said all that much on here since I started following the campaign, because most of what writing time I have is going on the columns, but I'm getting a really *creepy* vibe lately from Matt, and from the whole campaign.

Take these new campaign ads, for example. I'd embed a YouTube link here, but most of them seem to be region-locked to the US, and pretty much everyone who can read this is in the UK. But they're quite easy to understand. Matt stands in front of a giant image of the heads of the two other candidates on a black background, and says "the other two will try to convince you they're different from each other. The Republicans will say they're on the side of families, of business, and of improving the economy. The Democrats, on the other hand, will say they support the little guy against the people trying to make middle-class families' lives difficult. But under their skin, they're both the same" – at which point it cuts to a photo of two skulls on the same background.

Now, is it just me, or is that creepy as fuck? I mean, seriously, *skulls*?

This seems to be a big, *big* change from when he was still with the Democrats, and even the first couple of weeks of his independent campaign. He's got this kind of momentum now, but it's like the people around him are controlling the message far more even than they were when he was running for the candidacy of one of the major parties. You'd think going independent would free him up to get that positive message that he's always had in person across to the public, but he's going negative faster and faster.

People seem to be lapping it up, of course, and I suppose it's one of the things you have to do if you're running an "anti-politics" political campaign…but I don't like it myself.

I thought this campaign was about hope, not about fear. But still, he's going after the right targets, and who am I to argue against a little righteous anger (well, I do argue against a little righteous anger, but only because I support a *fucking huge avalanche of righteous fury*, but that's just me, and it doesn't seem to be Matt's style)?

But it's a really odd way to go about running negative ads, by American standards. Normally, the ads say stuff like "I'm not saying my opponent actually fucks pigs and exposes himself to children, but at least five kids have asked me why the Senator's groin smells of bacon. There are questions that need to be asked, and *why won't you answer them, Sir? What have you got to hide?"*

These ones…I think it's the depersonalisation (is that a word? It should be) of them that's the creepiest thing. His opponents aren't being treated as sleazy womanisers, or drunks, or hypocrites, or any of the normal things that politicians call each other. They're not being treated as people at all, but as lumps of meat. Like they don't actually matter in themselves, they're just objects. It's almost a psychopath's way of looking at things.

What I'm trying to figure out is who it is in the organisation who thinks this is a good idea. It's not Matt himself – he's just a decent person, I've spent enough time with him to know that this isn't how he thinks. I don't think it's Lola Denison, his running mate, either.

Denison's not really been covered much in the media, because there's not much to say about her. She's a second-term Congresswoman, actually elected as an independent, but backed by the Libertarian Party, which might surprise you given how right-wing they seem, but she appears to have been on the sane wing of the Libertarians, the ones who haven't had their brains turned to mush by Ayn Rand, and she seems to have mostly joined with them out of ambition, wanting to be a big fish in a small pond. But the fact that she stood as an independent rather than being an official Libertarian candidate tells you a lot about the way she works, too – she's not someone who gets attached to organisations when she can do everything herself. She did get elected as a Republican at first, but as soon as she'd got elected she ditched them – she'd used them to get into a position where she didn't need them any more. Which, you know, good for her, really.

She's just a figurehead, as far as I can tell – she doesn't have any real power within the organisation. Which is probably a good thing, as she's way to the right of Matt, though still to the left of most American politicos.

She sits in on the meetings, but doesn't say much of anything. When she does, it's usually something so obvious that everyone had already thought of it – she'll say something like "We need to make Vermont our next big target", and everyone will just say "of course" because where else where they going to target? – but she has no real say over any major decisions. She'll have been in the room when the campaign was okayed, of course, but she won't have suggested it, or really had much to say about it.

I keep trying to get her to do an interview with me, actually – it'd be really good to get her views on feminist stuff. Not that I expect her to actually *have* any feminist views, of course – this is a country where they seriously thought Hillary Clinton was a feminist – but I'd be very interested if she's as decent on abortion and queer stuff as Matt is.

(Still, at least she's not one of these "soft grunge" girls who seem to be so enthusiastic about Matt. I'm far too young to be turning into an old fogey already, but I still say there's nothing cute about those skull masks they're wearing, even if they do wear them while posing winsomely in a band T-shirt. I've been bitching about them with Janine, one of the staffers here, who has a good line in snark.)

One thing I will say for her, though, she's doing bloody well at keeping going through the campaign, for someone with a new baby to look after (Denison, not Janine, unless Janine has been keeping some *very* juicy secrets from me). And I definitely approve of her publicly breastfeeding, despite what some of the tabloids are saying about her.

But nobody else in the organisation has joined recently – there's no-one else who's come in since the convention. So maybe it's not someone who's joined, but someone who's left. Matt's lost a lot of the publicity people who were working with him when he was still running for the Democratic nomination, and it might well be that this is the campaign he would have been running all along if they hadn't been keeping such a tight leash on him.

Either way, this is freaking me out a little. These are not the ads I thought Matt would run, but it's not something that any of the new people would be able to bring in.

So there's someone I thought was better than this running these adverts. It's depressing, and more than a little scary. Any thoughts on this, O righteous army of fury? Am I overreacting, or is this a sign that Matt's just another politician after all?

Comments:

Tim 10AM: I told you, they're all the same. Ron Harrison's the only one who's offering any actual solutions to America's problems.

Rachel 10:15AM: Tim, I love you dearly, but you're a nutjob. Can we hear from the sane contingent now please?

Sarah 10:16AM: Do what you think is best. It sounds to me like Nelson's still compromising less than almost any politician, and doing so for the right reasons. But I'm here for you whatever you do.

Rachel 10:19AM: Oh, I'll still be supporting him no matter what. I just worry.

Joanne 10:17AM: That skull shit looks spooky.

Tim 10:18AM: Is he a member of the Skull & Bones? Is that what the advert's saying? It wouldn't surprise me.

Rachel 10:20AM: Shut up, Tim.

Joanne 10:20AM: Yes, shut up, Tim.

Chapter 30

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

Having travelled with them now for many weeks, I bade my leave of the caravan with which we had been making our journey, and Salman and I headed West together once we reached a certain oasis of which the natives had told us, one that had abundant water, but at which the Arabs would neither stop nor fill their water-skins. The reasons for this became apparent soon after our companions continued on their way, for there appeared a new tribe of people, a tribe of much stranger and more fearsome aspect.

This tribe, who referred to themselves as the *Shi'atul* but were not the *Shi'ahs* I had encountered hitherto, were of strange mien indeed. Their garb was unlike that of any other desert inhabitants I have seen, being more akin to that of a Turk than of an Arab, with spikes and other protuberances extending from leather jerkins and britches, over which were layers of what appeared to be chain mail. I marvelled at this, for in such an infernal clime one would no more wear such clothing than one would fill one's water bottle with brine – for it would have much the same effect, that of reducing a man in a short time to a desiccated husk, as the liquids which gave him life boiled away in the desert heat.

This was not, though, the most marvellous aspect of these people, for they adorned their faces with what appeared to be masks made from skulls. Yet these were not the skulls of men, unless some as-yet-undiscovered savage tribe exists whose morphology and physiognomy departs further from our own than we may now credit. While in some aspects they were human, in others they had more of the likeness of a Barbary ape, and in yet others they resembled nothing so much as one of Richard Owen's *dinosauria*. Their teeth were long and curved, like those of a great cat, and each skull was different from the next, as if all were models made by different sculptors, given the same description but realising it in their own manner. Yet these were no models, but bone and teeth as real as those in any man's head, and my only thought when first I saw them was that these were the skulls of the dreaded Mal'akh themselves.

The *Shi'atul*, though, were as human as I, and were for the most part of

the same Arabic stock as the members of the caravan with which I had been travelling. Yet they were of a very different manner, being arrogant, aloof and distant, rather than having the casual friendliness of the travellers. For two hours after we first saw them, they stood, at the edge of our vision, so near to unmoving that it was only by the movements of their elongated shadows on the desert sand that it was possible to tell that they were men rather than statues, and observed us without speaking. Salman took his lead from me, and both of us stood likewise unmoving, before eventually, as the sun went down, and the shadows of the *Shi'atul* grew so elongated and distorted that they could barely be recognised as human at all, the *Shi'atul* came forward, encircling Salman and myself.

They were seemingly unarmed, and had it not been for their horrific aspect I would have assumed them to be coming as friends, for they had not the manner of those who wish to cause harm. Yet they had spent so long staring at us silently, and they were masked so horrifically, that I drew my sabre as a precaution against attack.

I greeted them in Arabic, as politely as was possible in the circumstances, and the tallest of the masked men stepped forward, his hand raised, and said in English:

"Hail to thee, Ruffian Dick, converser with monkeys."

The shortest then stepped up and said in Arabic "Hail to thee, Captain Burton, *Hajji*"

And then a third, of my height, stepped forward and said in my own voice "Hail to thee, Sir Richard, who will be a Cousin hereafter."

I was, of course, perplexed at how these people knew my name, and said so, at which the third man responded "Send away thy servant, Burton, and we shall tell you all you need to know."

I dismissed Salman from my presence, and repeated my earlier question.

"We know all about you, Richard Burton," said the one who spoke in my voice. "We know you as a seeker. You seek after the *Mal'akhim*, but also you seek after knowledge. You disdain the slave-morality of the Christian, who is taught that to seek knowledge and equality with God is the ultimate sin, and you know that the only true sin is to be less than one's full potential. Is this not so, Captain Burton?"

"It is."

“We can help you in your quest, Captain Burton. We are no friend to the *Mal’akhim*, and we have knowledge that belongs to no other men in this time. But to gain this knowledge, you must become one of us. You must join the *Shi'atul* . Will you join us, though you shall have to swear the most fearsome and bloody oaths?”

I had joined many organisations in the past for such knowledge, and all had required the taking of such oaths, and so I did not hesitate to acquiesce.

Immediately had I done so, I was thrust into a mass of activity, and within minutes I had been disrobed and was stood naked among these berobed and bemasked figures, while as if from nowhere appeared a goblet, a sword, a dagger, and several candles, which were placed atop a makeshift altar.

All but the one who spoke in my voice knelt, and bade me kneel with them. At this, the standing one took the sword and smashed the pommel onto the altar, and said “Get up, fool! The *Shi'atul* kneel to no man!”

I, and the others around me, then rose. I saw that the man with the sword wore a black robe, and that of the four closest to me, one wore yellow and the other three red.

One of the men in red moved to the right of the man in black, turned to face the West, and proclaimed “εκας, εκας , εινα ιταςπιτια!”

The man in black knocked again, and said “Fraters and Sorors of the Faction, assist me to open the Hall of the Neophytes. Frater Imperator, see that the Temple is properly guarded.”

The man in red turned to the man in yellow, saying “Frater Cancellerius, is the Temple guarded?”, and the man in yellow knocked in return.

“Very Honuored Godfather, the Temple is properly guarded.”

The three men then said one word each. “σκιες”,“οτο”,“σκοταδι”, and a hoodwink was placed over my head, and a rope tied thrice round my waist.

Through the hood I heard “Very Honoured Godfather, is it your pleasure that the Candidate be admitted?”

“It is. Admit Richard Francis Burton in due form, who will hereafter be known as Patruelis Ricardus. Conduct the Candidate to the foot of the altar. Child of Earth, why dost thou request admission into this Faction?”

At this, someone whispered to me, and I repeated, “My soul is

wandering in darkness seeking for the Light that casts the Shadow, and I believe that in this Faction the knowledge of that Light may be obtained."

"Swear thou by Harpocrates, the God of Silence, who is also Horus, the reborn child from whose sacrifice our Faction owes its own rebirth, that thou will never betray the Faction?"

"I do so swear."

"Then by fire I shall cleanse you."

At this point I felt a tremendous pain, and realised that the candle was being placed under my hand. I did not flinch, but waited for the pain to pass.

"Did you feel anything?"

"I did."

"What was it?"

"A torture."

"This torture shall be nothing should you betray the Faction. Remember that Hassan al-Sabbah, he who was known as the Assassin, and who was able to reanimate the heads of dead betrayers, that their fellows could hear them scream from hell, was of our Faction also, and that he was merciful. Knowing this, do you still wish to join us?"

"I do."

"Then you may now have your eyes opened, and see the truth."

The hoodwink was removed from my head, and I stood before the man in black, who was now clutching the dagger in one hand, while the other was held palm-up over the goblet.

"Drink now of the blood of paradox!" he cried, and brought the dagger down on his palm, gushing blood into the goblet, which he then handed me to drink. "Do this in remembrance of yourself, for you have had your last supper."

He raised his hand and lunged towards me, striking down at me with a vicious stabbing motion, but I felt no pain, only a slight poking. I looked down and saw no blood, and then saw that in his hand was, not the dagger any more, but a banana. I laughed with relief, but then he gestured to the shadows that were being formed by the flickering candlelight, and I saw

that his shadow still held a dagger, and that my shadow was collapsing.

“Drink, I say!” cried the officiant. “Drink the blood of paradox and revive your shadow!”

I managed to swallow down the brackish liquid in the goblet, and immediately my shadow stood tall again.

“Your shadow has now been sustained by the blood of your own future. Today you are truly one with paradox.”

Saying this, the man in black raised his hands to his mask. “This mask now belongs to you. Treat it as I have.”

He removed the mask and handed it to me, and underneath the mask the face was my own, some forty years older. Without saying another word, the old man turned and walked into the crowd of *Shi'atul*, and vanished from my view.

Chapter 31

Hello again, it's me, your old pal Shift. Just so you're not too worried, the bit I'm interrupting at the moment is a romantic subplot – Rachel meets the girl of her dreams in a bar, they go back to her room, that sort of thing. It was meant to be a more important plot thread, but the writer sort of lost interest in it. You're not missing much, except for the prurient interest factor. My bit's much better.

No, really. The author's really no good at sex scenes. You're missing nothing.

So, anyway, when we left off I'd been removed from existence, and completely wiped from the space-time continuum. You might then wonder, quite reasonably, how I've managed to pop up here.

The thing was, as I quickly discovered, I was never a real person at all. As soon as I stopped existing, there was a wonderful clarity, as I became nothing less than a living concept, and of course I realised that that's what I'd been all along, and I'd never been anything else.

Existing without a physical form is more difficult than you might imagine. You quickly become incoherent unless you find something outside yourself to latch on to. You might say "I think, therefore I am", but if the thinking doesn't have an effect on the outside world, then *am* you? *Do* you think?

What would it mean to exist but not to be able to affect anything else? If a tree falls in the forest, and the only person who sees it has no physical existence, did it fall at all? And so on. That kind of question takes on a lot more urgency when you're trying to work out how you're seeing and hearing things when photons and air molecules aren't interacting with you.

Sorry…when you're made of words, semantic questions do tend to take on a more pressing interest.

So, I was non-existent in a physical sense, but I existed as an idea… what, precisely, did that mean to me?

It only took a little while, though, before I noticed that I wasn't *completely* non-existent. I observed the world, from my non-corporeal, near-omniscient position as a figment of my own imagination, and I noticed things happening that shouldn't have. Things that I had done still happened,

even though I wasn't there to do them. There were traces of me left, and they caused what I can only describe as plot holes.

After examining these plot holes for a while, and contemplating my own nature, I came to what seemed to be the only reasonable conclusion:

I was a character in a novel, and I'd been written out when the author did a second draft.

It made perfect sense, in many ways. I existed in the mind of the author of the book, and he or she had originally written me as the hero (at least…I hope I was the hero. I wouldn't like to think of myself as the villain, or God forbid the comic relief, but I remember myself as being fairly heroic, all things considered. But then aren't we all…no, I'm not quite *that* far gone into pretension just yet), but then I'd been written out. The author apparently felt that my role in the plot was unnecessary – that a book didn't actually need a hero at all, that the plot could get on just fine without someone sorting everything out and righting all the wrongs.

I disagreed.

The plot I had uncovered – even though I could remember far too little of it – was simply too important to ignore, to leave to be sorted out by chance. It wasn't just a matter of the security of one little planet, though that would be enough, but of the fate of the whole timeline. The fact that the timeline in question was apparently a fictional one didn't bother me as much as you might imagine. It was the timeline I came from, and the timeline I had to protect. I had met, spoken to, even loved, the people of that timeline, and their ontological status was really of no interest when put up against the simple fact that they were in danger.

So naturally, I had to attempt to write myself back into the novel. I kept trying to insert myself directly into the narrative, but could only get a few words or a sentence, a paragraph at most, into the book before I was blocked and the narrative just carried on as if I wasn't there. Frustrating as hell, of course, but what can you do? But I found I *could* influence non-narrative sections of the book. Exposition, background, footnotes – I could get into those, even if the main narrative thrust was barred to me.

That, incidentally, is what I'm doing right now, if you hadn't guessed, but this is all rather meta-textual and doesn't do much good as far as advancing the plot goes. What I *can* do from here is affect the deep background stuff. You see, if I mention something as a background detail here, it affects the plot elsewhere. So if I was to say, for example, that

Rachel's email password is very easy to guess if you have a quick look at her Wikipedia page, then that becomes the truth within the novel. But of course, I can only do so much. The novel still has an author, and more to the point it has a villain. And that villain is at least as capable of rewriting the book as I am.

Someone in this novel-world is planning to rewrite history. Whoever it was already has the power to do that in minor ways, like writing me out of the world, but give somebody the caldera and…well, put it this way…the caldera can rewrite the history of more than just one universe. And influences can travel from books to their readers quite easily. If I was reading this book, I'd be *really hoping* the goodies win.

So obviously they have to be stopped. You can't just go around letting people recreate universes in their own image. I quite liked my universe the way it was, with me in it, just as I suspect you're rather keen on your own existence.

So if the story was missing a hero, I had to create one. The plan was quite simple, really – find some minor character, and persuade them to do all the things I'd done. Voila! A hero in the second draft. I'd just make some minor tweaks to how they dealt with the villain confrontation.

Now, ideally I'd want to use someone like one of the Remote – if you're a conceptual entity wanting to manipulate people into doing what you want, then a bunch of people who do whatever the media tells them to are pretty much perfect. Unfortunately, while there were a few Remote on Earth at that time, I found I couldn't get them to notice me. No matter how loudly I **SHOUTED** my telepathic messages after them, I couldn't get them to even acknowledge my (non) existence.

In fact, it seems that the villain (and my memory of who it is is *very* cloudy) has enough power to put a psychic dampening field over the whole Earth. I tried to contact all sorts of people – a British journalist who was assigned to the campaign already, various members of the intelligence community – and got nowhere. I was blocked from contacting anyone who might be of any use to me whatsoever.

There was only one person I could find who seemed immune to the psychic dampening field, and to be honest I couldn't even work out why he was in the novel at all – a redneck dullard by the name of David Larsen. Somehow, this character who was completely disconnected from the action was the only person who I could contact. I had to try to persuade him to

uncover a criminal conspiracy that reaches to the top of American politics, and that would have potentially devastating effects on life throughout the multiverse.

And this is a problem, because the man's an idiot, and seems completely incapable of following the most basic instructions. He's going to wreck everything if he's not careful…

Chapter 32

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part nine

“And so” (quoth the third Wazir), “the prince shall grant Abdillah the slave the freedom he requests, and the slave shall go free, and shall father many sons, and shall live the life of a free man.

“Yet the end times shall come all too soon, for this tale is a tale of the end. And *Qiyamat* shall come, after Isa (*alayhis salam*) hath defeated the followers of *Al-Masḥ ad-Dajjāl* the one-eyed, and Isa shall call all before him, rich and poor, man and woman, king and slave alike.

“And Isa shall call Abdillah, he who will defeat the djinn, to face him. And to Abdillah he shall say ‘Hast thou served Allah well, O freed man? ’

“And Abdillah shall reply, ‘O great Isa, I have served Allah, a million blessings be upon him, as best I can. I have failed many times, and I have the weaknesses of all men, but I have declared that Allah is the only God, I have made the *salat*[35], I have fasted during *Ramadan*, I have paid the *zakat*[36], but I fear I have never been *istita’ah* [37], for when I was young I lacked in money, and once I had money I lacked in strength. Forgive me, O Isa, for I dearly wished to make the *Hajj* before my death, but I failed.’

“And Isa shall say in turn unto Abdillah ‘O true and faithful servant, thou hast served Allah well indeed. Truly this day shalt thou be welcomed into Jannat. Thy place is in the lowest levels, but in truth even the lowest levels of Jannat are a paradise unsurpassed in the imaginings of men. Enter thee through *Bāb al-Aymān*[38] and rejoice, for thy suffering is now ended, and a joyful eternity awaits.’

“Then shall Isa turn to the prince, and say unto him ‘O prince, thou hast been a prince upon the earth, but even a prince must serve one higher than himself. How hast thou served Allah the all-mighty? ’

“And the prince shall respond ‘O Isa, peace be unto you, I have been the most faithful and loyal servant of Allah, to whom all praises are due! For I have engaged in a mighty *jihad*[39] and have defeated the enemies of Allah! See, I bring the head of one of the *djinn*, cleft from his body with my own hands. I have fought the servant of the Shaytan, and here is the proof.’ And he shall hold up the head of the djinn, still burning with its

unholy fire lo those many years later.

"And Isa (*alayhis salam*) shall smile, and shall say 'O good and holy prince, if this be true thou hast indeed served Allah well, and shall be this day in the highest levels of Jannat. O verminous and squalid *djinn*, is this prince speaking truth? '

"And the head of the *djinn* shall speak, and shall say thusly 'O lord Isa, there is no truth in the speech of this evil man, for he has been a servant of the *Shaytan* all his life, though he knows it not. He is indolent, and a drunkard, and a liar. And this is not the worst of it, for he hath dared to lie even in the face of a prophet, for he slew me not. My head was removed from my neck by Abdillah the slave, and this braggart is lower than the swine for his deception.'

"And the prophet Isa shall grow scarlet in his wrath, and he shall say unto the prince, 'O wretched and perfidious worm, O lower than the low, today shalt thou be cast into the lowest pits of Jahannam, where thou shalt spend eternity among the flames, for thou art like unto a dog that hath rolled in its own droppings.'

"And the prince shall fall into Jahannam, where every man shall perish who is willing to order men to fight, but will not pick up the scimitar himself."

And there ended the third Wazir's tale.

Hearing this, the Shaykh thought unto himself, and then to all the Wazirs he spake in turn.

To the first Wazir, he said "O thou my wisest and holiest Wazir, thy story shows thy wisdom and piety, yet it does not display the judgement which is needed for a Shaykh."

To the second Wazir, quoth he "O thou my youngest Wazir, thou showest great compassion in thy story. Yet the moral of thy tale is that one must always be at the mercy of destiny. This may be true, but it is not good for a leader to think this way – he must try to influence his fate, for if he trieth not, how may he know when he might succeed?"

"So you, O my third Wazir, with your tale and its moral of strength, and honesty, thou must be Shaykh after me, for thou knowest that he who sends his men to war must fight himself, and that better by far is the man who is honest about his own failings than he who takes glory for others' acts. So thou shalt be the Shaykh, for I fear that now I am to die."

And the old Shaykh did fall back, dead, and his soul did ascend to Jannat.

And the daemon who had been called up by the third Wazir did laugh to himself in Jahannam, for the tale of a daemon, implanted in a man's mind, can allow the daemon to possess him as much as if he had been bitten. And the daemon-seed in the new Shaykh's mind was growing already.

Chapter 33

From the *Sunday Herald* 16th September

She Looks Like A Woman But She Talks Like A Man

Rachel Edwards

As the Presidential race is heating up, with Matt Nelson starting to creep ahead in the polls, one question is on the lips of everyone in America – "who is Lola Denison?"

The independent Congresswoman from Arizona had virtually no national prominence before being chosen as Matt Nelson's running mate – she's barely been mentioned in any of the national media – and as an unknown quantity she's been the subject of much speculation in the last few weeks. Unsurprisingly, more of it has been based on her appearance – the phrase "glacial beauty" has been used so often in the last fortnight that anyone writing a profile of Tilda Swinton will now be searching desperately through a thesaurus to avoid confusion – than on her politics.

So who *is* Lola? I met her in a club down in old Soho – or a hotel bar in Pascagoula – to find out.

I got off on the wrong foot at first, by addressing her as "Ms. Denison". Apparently the correct form of address is Representative Denison, as she made very clear to me, saying "I went to quite some effort to get the right to be addressed that way." This was said with a smile, but it was very clear that she meant it. This is a woman for whom, despite her libertarian politics, status and position are very important – she always addressed me as "Rachel" or "dear".

After this rocky start, though, the conversation became much easier.

How did you come to start working with Senator Nelson, given your political differences?

Well, dear, the thing to understand is that the senator and myself *do* have political differences, but we have far more political similarities. People label me as "right-wing" and him as "left-wing", but those labels are just that – labels. Very useful, no doubt, if one wants to identify which of two near-identical warring sides one is cheering for, but far less so if one wants to talk about *ideas*.

And so, yes, the senator and I definitely disagree on some subjects, as any two thinking people do. But we agree, for example, on removing many of the ridiculous burdens which the state puts on people trying to live their lives as they wish. And we certainly agree on the environment – geothermal energy is one of my own particular interests.

We disagree on some economic matters, but then I'd disagree with *whoever* was the President about those, and despite what one reads in newspapers such as your own – no offence intended, my dear – the President really has rather little power over economic matters.

Cross-party friendships are more common than you may think in Washington, at least among those who are not pig-headedly partisan, and we have both grown to have a great deal of respect for each other.

You mention geothermal energy as a policy priority. What are your other priorities?

Oh, I have several. Childcare, for a start. I am, as you may know, a single mother, and that's something that's a rarity in politics. But until one has children of one's own, it is almost impossible to imagine just how important one's children become to one. My own daughter is the centre of my life, and I see my political career as being, in a very real way, an attempt to build a better world for her.

But of course, even though I've had the advantage of being in a rather privileged position, it's still immensely difficult to juggle looking after a child with a career. I would like to see that changed.

So you'd be the first feminist Vice-President?

Oh, I wouldn't say that. Again, I'm not at all keen on labels, and I certainly wouldn't call myself a feminist. I'm motivated by enlightened self-interest, and as I'm a woman, some of the problems the feminists see are problems I am concerned about. But for example I have no position on abortion whatsoever.

Really?

Absolutely. I have no intention of ever getting one myself, and so I don't care about it, and am certainly not going to pretend to feel passionately about a subject that simply doesn't affect my own life in order to placate those who consider it the most important issue the world is facing today.

I care about the things that affect me – having a safe, secure, world for my children to grow up in, and having the freedom to live my life the way I want to without excessive government interference or stupid unnecessary wars causing trouble. I think that most people, if asked, would agree, and that's the world I want to build.

What do you think of the other candidates in the race?

I don't.

Your campaign has come under fire recently for its attack ads. Some have said they're too upsetting to be shown on TV. What do you say to your critics?

What I say is that they should grow up. The commercials themselves are puerile, of course – they focus on attacking personalities rather than talking about ideas, but then so do all the commercials that anyone puts out. They are, however, aimed at adults, and if adults can't cope with a little bit of black humour on their TV, there's really no hope for them.

I know you haven't got much time left, so I'll just ask you briefly – do you have any ambition to become President yourself?

One doesn't run for Vice-President unless one has at least some hope of going for the top eventually, does one? But this isn't a campaign to elect me President – it's a campaign to elect Matt Nelson. I hope that the question of me running for President myself doesn't come up for a long time yet.

And with that, Congresswoman Denison was off, to address a rally of Mississippians, in front of a state flag that still shows the stars and bars of the old Confederate flag, a relic of the war that showed just how deeply the dividing lines run in this country. Whether she and Nelson can succeed in uniting both sides of that divide against the two political parties that have for so long represented those warring factions remains to be seen.

Chapter 34

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

Having now undergone the ceremony which marked me forever as one of their family, I could now speak freely with my new Brothers of the Faction, for they could no more betray me than they could betray their own right arms. I therefore proceeded to inform them of the nature of my quest, and of the task I was to perform.

I must admit to a slight unease as I did this. For all their obvious good intent, there was something about the Faction's regalia which suggested something of the Mal'akh, and it was by no means obvious to me that they were not, themselves, aligned with my ostensible enemies.

This would not, in itself, have been problematic for me, as I had no quarrel myself with the Mal'akh, and had no difficulty in believing them a much-maligned species. My business with them was purely an obligation of my service to Queen and Empire – but that was, itself, more than enough reason for me to have no compunction about seeing the whole species obliterated. A man's honour is more important than petty concerns of squeamishness, as all soldiers know (though some will deny it in polite company), and it is entirely appropriate when in the service of one's country to kill those with whom, on another occasion, one would not only have no quarrel but would have much to discuss.

It is an unfortunate fact, however, that soldiers are also aware of the converse of this: that a perfectly amicable companion can, once the label of enemy has been attached, kill one without a moment's hesitation, and feel none the worse for it. I had my suspicions that even were the Faction themselves unlikely to behave in this manner, if they were allied to the Mal'akh then my movements would be relayed, and the Mal'akh would already be planning my fate.

So it was with great caution, then, that I brought up the subject of my prey with the Faction members, and with great relief that I discovered that they had no great affection for those daemonic entities which I was pursuing.

However, it was still the case that they had little more knowledge of the

habits of these elusive creatures than any of the other Arabs I had spoken to on my travels. They did, though, provide me with the crucial piece of information which, it was hoped, would lead me to the end of my quest.

For they told me a tale, one that I could scarce believe, had I not already seen for myself the strange events that can take place in the uncharted reaches of the desert, where no white man other than myself has ever dared venture. But those who have been to such extremes, who have visited the places unmarked on any map, know that rules which seem to apply in Christendom have no validity in these soft places, that one may spend a week in some strange village and leave a minute after one entered, or walk through a forest and exit before one entered. To those who know of such places, then, the Eleven Day Empire seems no more unlikely than many another area, save that it be located within the bounds of our own British Isles.

Yet it is unlike those places in this; while the villages that appear and disappear as they will, or the oases that are forever out of reach of the man dying of thirst, are unmoored in time, the Eleven Day Empire is unmoored in space. Those places will disappear and reappear, at different times, yet always in the same place. The gates to the Eleven Day Empire, conversely, are in many places – the back room of a certain public house, a portion of the sewer which even the rats seem to avoid, a dressmaker's shop – yet they always lead to the same time, those eleven days which the late King George sold to the Faction under the pretence of updating the calendar (for in truth, as any fool knows, there was no real need to turn from a grand Roman calendar, with that greatest of all names attached to it, save to sell those eleven days, and no amount of protestation about modernity will convince me or any other intelligent man otherwise).

In this Eleven Day Empire, or at least in the London within it (for no man will speak of any other parts of that land, and I have learned that when the Faction refuse to speak on a subject, that subject is best avoided), live men and women of many times and many lands, and not all of them of this Earth, but rather from celestial bodies, many of them unknown to humanity. There are mechanical men, and ghosts, and things which do not appear as men at all, yet all are members of the same organisation (though they do not like it to be called such).

And yet the Faction are only one of numerous groupings such as they that exist in this *magni mundi umbra*, this second world outside of time and space, in which powers of which mortal men can but dream do battle for

the fate of worlds not yet born. There are a myriad groups, with agendas which cannot be fathomed by intellects even as vast as my own, but which could, if need be, destroy our world as you or I would swat a mosquito.

And these, too, can be found on the Earth, just like that Empire. In the soft parts of the world, if one knows of the correct rituals, incantations and procedures, one can call these beings into existence, for a short time, and from them glean information as one would from a *djinn.*

I was told of one such entity, the Woman of the Last Night, who could be found in the desert and who was known to share the Faction's antipathy to the Mal'akhim. This woman, I was told, was a cold, evil woman who would lure men to their doom by giving them exactly what they asked for. The Faction advised that to deal with her would be the greatest of foolishness, but I of course have made my name by doing that which lesser men claim as foolish.

Such women hold no fear for a man such as I, who has experienced all the pleasures that the feminine mind, such as it is, can offer, and who knows his own will to be stronger than that of any woman. Such women exist to be used for what they can provide, and then cast aside with no shame, and no amount of persuasive charms can convince a true man otherwise.

I said as much to my new comrades, and while they appeared to doubt me, they could see that by hook or by crook I was determined to discover the truth of these rumours – of the Mal'akhim and of the book which held their secrets. I would have that information, and if it meant dealing with a succubus then that would be the price I would have to pay for it.

So they explained to me how the Woman of the Last Night could be found. I had to walk to a certain spot in the desert, where I would find a large plant, taller than the tallest of men. This plant would provide me with shade for the vigil that would follow.

I was to leave all my belongings behind, save for a loin-cloth. The plant, I was told, would have succulent leaves which would provide my moisture. I could drink my fill of their juices, but was not to eat the flesh of the plant – no food was to touch my mouth.

I should remain in the shadow of the plant for three days, and remain awake for that time. Should the desert heat become too much to bear, I was permitted to bury myself in the sand for a time to keep the sun from my skin, but that was the only relief I should be allowed.

Should I keep this vigil for three days, then I was told that “the fabric of space-time will tear and open up to the vortex beyond” (I record these words as they were spoken, for they meant nothing to me then and little more now) and that from the void beyond the worlds would step the Woman of the Last Night, who would provide me with the answer to my questions.

So I was to leave this place of skulls and bury myself in the sand for three days, before rising again to meet my own Magdalene. There was some satisfaction in that, for one who has never accepted any man as his superior, even the Nazarene. Where one man can go, another may follow, and so I set off with the sure knowledge that I should achieve my goal.

Chapter 35

So…the messages were definitely telling me something true, that was just obvious by this point. The question in my mind was where they were coming from.

My first thought was that it was some sort of government thing. I mean, you hear about that kind of thing all the time, don't you? Mind control experiments? They're going on constantly, from what people say.

But on the other hand, I'm not important enough for the government to be sending messages to. I know that much, at least. If the government knew that Matt Nelson was killing young girls and drinking their blood…well, they'd do something about it, wouldn't they? Unless they were in on it too, but then why would they tell me? It didn't make any sense.

Unless it was a rogue agent, of course. But that just seemed ridiculous. If you were a rogue agent, you'd try to tell the newspapers, or take the guy out yourself. You wouldn't send me these messages and hope I'd do something about it.

So my second thought was that it might be the Devil. That would make sense…the Devil trying to tempt me to kill an innocent man. But if he was innocent, why would these girls be turning up dead? No…this was no innocent man, and so the messages couldn't be from the Devil.

So if it wasn't the government, and it wasn't the Devil, that left only one real possibility. I was a prophet, and I was receiving messages from the Lord himself. And if the Lord sends you a message, brother, you pay attention. You ignore the boss at the factory, and the worst that can happen is you have to go on Welfare. Ignore the boss up above, and you spend eternity in a pit of flames. When you think about that sort of thing…I mean *really* think about it, like it's something that could really happen to you, then you start to pay a hell of a lot of attention to what you're being told.

And I was being told that Matt Nelson, the man who could well be the next leader of the free world, was a vampire who was going around slitting the throats of teenage girls and drinking their blood, to keep him alive forever. When you're being given that kind of information, by the Lord God Almighty Himself, you have to do something about it. I'm *going* to do something about it. If God will just give me the courage to do it.

God help me, I'm terrified. I've never killed a man before, and…well, I

guess he's not really a man at all, and sometimes an animal just needs killin', but…he's the President. You don't just kill the President. Not…not the President of the USA. You don't do that. But I've gotta. He's a monster.

But…God, god god god god god I don't want to do this. I don't want to kill somebody, and I don't wanna die, but I know I'm gonna. Those secret service men, they'll kill me, take me down before I have a chance at a second shot. At least… at least it'll be a quick, clean death. I hope. I don't want them to take me alive. I'm scared of needles.

But the Lord was having mercy on me, at least at first. He told me… well, it ain't quite clear what he told me. He told me that there was a "psychic dampening field", created using "Great Houses technology", and that only bits of his messages could get through. He told me to get in touch with the English girl, Rachel Edwards, the journalist, because she would have some more of the missing pieces of the puzzle. I should tell her what I knew, and then she could tell me what she knew, and between us we could defeat this serial killing demon.

I'm not one to argue with the word of the Lord, and so I had to get in touch with her. But the problem was, I didn't know how to get in touch with her without letting her know who I was. And if she was hanging around with a demon vampire creature, I didn't want her knowing that it was me who'd got in touch with her, in case she decided to tell him. After all, she kept writing about how great he was in her newspaper.

I tried calling up the campaign headquarters to warn her, and spoke to this chick called Janine something. I kept trying to explain to her that I needed to talk to Rachel Edwards, but she wouldn't put me through. She kept saying "Rachel Edwards does not work for the campaign". I told her I knew that, and that I knew she was Rachel's friend (the messages had told me that) and could get a message to her, but she put the phone down every time I called. After the third time, a police officer came round to warn me about threatening messages' to the Nelson campaign.

Now, the messages I was getting started telling me "YOU'RE DOING THIS ALL WRONG, YOU IDIOT!" – they didn't sound like they were from God at all. God doesn't call people the names that the messages were calling me. I'm not even sure God knows those words (although God's meant to know everything, isn't he? So maybe he does). I figured that the messages from God must be getting some interference from the Devil – that was probably the psychic dampening field God had told me about

before. The only thing I could do was to do like they say on the TV and listen to my heart and trust myself. I could tell the good messages from the bad ones, and I'd just obey the good ones and ignore the Devil.

I looked at her website, and didn't see nothing new up there, so she obviously hadn't figured anything out. I was worried sick about her. That poor girl had probably already fallen into Nelson's clutches. I needed to find some way to find out if she was OK, and to save her.

I was going to have to travel to North Dakota, the next campaign stop, and try to meet up with her, to tell her in person what was going on. We were going to have to work together to destroy this demon before he could become President of the United States.

But that…well, it didn't go well. I don't really want to talk about it, but she clearly didn't want to team up with me. I think I upset her, actually. Rachel, if you ever see this, I hope you understand now. I'm so sorry. I just hope she's still alive. She's not updated her website in a while, and her columns in the newspaper have stopped. I'd hate to think anything had happened to that poor girl. But I hope I've given her enough warning. I hope I did that much good at least, even if I didn't do what I'd intended to do.

But if I couldn't work with Rachel to stop this vampire creature from becoming President of the USA, then I was going to have to do it by myself. And it was going to take more than just using my vote to do it.

I'm sorry…I'm jumping all over the place here, aren't I? I hope this is making some kinda sense to you, because it made none to me and I'm living it. Why did you have to put this burden on me, Lord?

Chapter 36

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part ten

And so it came to pass that throughout the Shaykh's lands the people wept sore, for he had been a good and a beneficent Shaykh, and truly it is said:

A good Shaykh is the rarest of men * Who riches corrupt not

And on his death the people mourn * And fear they for their lot

The peoples of his land, then, were greatly afeared, for they knew naught of the wisdom of their new Shaykh, for he was a man who liked much the darkness of the shadows, and never ventured into the light of a campfire or a busy street.

"What is to become of us, O our Shaykh?" they asked of him, as they lined up to pay him the obeisance that was his due as the heir of the old Shaykh. "Shall we be put to work to fill your belly, as in times past, or to conquer new lands for you, or shall we be allowed to live in peace for a portion, to feed our own bellies and win wives instead of conquests?"

And the new Shaykh smiled, for he was an evil man but knew that a ruler must appear good to his subjects, for while all men are capable of following an evil leader, none will follow even a good leader, should he appear not to love his people more than himself.

So saith he to them, "O my people! Fear not that I shall be a tyrant, like he who came before the last Shaykh. As the last Shaykh was to he who came before, so shall I be unto him. My love for my people knows no bounds, and I shall work for thy happiness and peace. Thy bellies shall be full, and thy wives thy own. Your daughters shall not be mine, but shall marry who you choose, and your sons shall fight in no wars, save to defend our lands against the infidel should they attack us. You shall be free to do as thou wilt, so long as you continue to pay me tribute as before."

And there was much rejoicing throughout the land, for the peoples thought unto themselves, "Lo, we are blessed indeed, for our Shaykh cares for his people as a father careth for his sons."

Yet they were in the gravest of error, for the new Shaykh cared only for his people as the shepherd careth for his lambs, treating them with the tendrest of mercies while they provide wool for his clothing, but slaughtering them for his meat should he wish it, and with neither regret nor hesitation. Such was their joy and rejoicing, that they realised not that a truly good Shaykh would show with his actions, not with his words, that he was a good Shaykh.

Yet truly it did seem to them that the new Shaykh would be a good and benevolent ruler, for he had been an advisor to the old Shaykh, and had been known to be the wisest of his advisers. When he had his rivals cast into servitude, removing their manly parts, and making these *castrati* guard his *harem*[40], this was seen as proof of his benevolence, for it was the custom among those people to have rivals put to the sword when a new Shaykh came to power. To leave his rivals alive, and even to entrust them with vital work, seemed mercy indeed, even though the Shaykh was keeping them alive only that they may be of use to him.

For the new Shaykh had ambitions, and wanted not merely to be Shaykh of an single tribe, but instead to rule over the whole earth, for like unto Iblis he was proud, and thought himself the equal of Allah himself, though all know that Allah has no equal, and we are unto him as an ant is unto the elephant.

The Shaykh wished to conquer the rest of the barbarian lands to the West, then to become Caliph, and then like Sikander[41] himself to conquer up to the edges of the world, until there were no more worlds to conquer.

Yet the Shaykh was troubled, for no sooner had he become Shaykh and started to amass his armies, but he started to sicken. The long black hair of which he had been so proud started to turn white, his green eyes reddened, the smile with which he had charmed his way to power was seen no more (and when his teeth were seen, they seemed somehow sharper and crueler than before), and he even seemed smaller – he who had been a giant among men was now stooped and bent, as if the weight of power was pressing him down.

Soon he was seen no more during the daylight, hiding in his tent and venturing out only at night. He complained of a great hunger, and knew not his wives.

This continued for one full moon, and the people were sore afraid, for

they believed that their new Shaykh, like he who had been their leader before, would soon be departing from them.

Yet one night, the Shaykh espied him a young virgin, the most comely in the tribe, and he said unto his Wazir “Bring her unto my tent, that I may go in to her.”

And the young virgin was brought unto the Shaykh’s tent, and in the morning he did come out of his tent, no longer the pale, stooped, haggard figure he had been before, but standing tall and smiling. Yet the young woman he had taken unto his bed left not his tent, and she was never seen again.

That night, he saw another young beauty, excelling in seemliness and pleasing semblance, and did call for her to enter his tent, that he may go in to her also. And when he left his tent that morning, he looked stronger than ever, and many remarked on his health and vigour, but again the virgin he had taken unto his bed was not with him.

On the third night, he called for another young virgin, most comely in appearance, to come unto his bed. But this night, the father of the young woman, fearing for his daughter, said “Fiend, thou shalt not take my daughter unto thy bed, for thou hast not married her, and it is said that the women thou goest in to are never seen again!”

And the Shaykh did say unto the man “If I cannot have thy daughter, then I shall have you in her stead!”

And saying this, he did take the virgin’s father by the throat, and in full view of his Wazirs did tear into the man’s neck with his teeth, and did feast upon his blood.

Having drunk his fill, he dropped the corpse, and saying “Thus perish all who defy me” did retire unto his bed-chamber. And none offered him any resistance thenceforth.

Chapter 37

From *radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com*, 30th September

Shit.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit.

OK, this is even more friends-locked than the last post. Something very strange is going on with the campaign, and you are *not* to mention this post to anyone *unless and until* I become uncontactable all of a sudden – in which case, please get this to the police.

A whole metric fuckton of creepy shit has been happening to me over the last couple of weeks, and I am *fucking scared*. As scared as I've ever been in my entire life. More scared than that.

Creepy thing number one – I have been getting creepy emails from some bloke I don't know. At least I assume he's a bloke – he's hiding his identity well. They've been coming *from my own email account*. That means whoever this is, *he knows my password*. Even my girlfriend doesn't know my password. Hell, half the time *I* can't remember it. But he has access to my account, and is sending me emails, as me.

Creepy thing number two – the content of these emails. He keeps telling me to watch out, that "bad things are happening to girls like you", and that I'm in very real danger. I don't *think* he's wanting to sound threatening, I think he thinks he sounds like he's giving me a friendly warning…but the fact that he thinks that is fucked-up in itself. How the fuck do you send someone an email, warning them about bad things, and send it from their own email account, and not immediately think "Oh yeah, I'm acting like a fucking creepy stalker, I probably shouldn't do that"?

Janine (I may have mentioned her before? My accomplice in snarkery and clothes-swapping? She works for the campaign, anyway) told me that she'd sicced the police on someone leaving similar messages for me on the campaign's phone number a few days ago. Either I'm a creep magnet or it's the same bloke, and neither option sounds exactly cheery.

Creepy thing number three – I think I *am* in real danger. The stalker has been telling me to look at news reports, about young women dying. At first I thought he was just trying to freak me out – and frankly I've had *way* creepier than that, like the bloke who used to send me photoshopped

pictures of my decapitated head with his cock in my mouth, compared to whom this bloke is only about a three on the scale of totally fucked-up nutjobs – but then I noticed what he was actually telling me. These women were all about my age, and they had all died in cities where I'd been. I was being stalked by a fucking serial killer.

I would have noticed that earlier, except the creepy fucker is also someone who doesn't know the difference between a URL and a Google search term. How the hell he's managed to hack into my email when he seems less computer-literate than my Dad, I don't know.

Now, the problem is, this isn't something you can go to the police about. They don't take this sort of shit seriously, and they'd say that it was just someone trying to wind me up. There's no other connection between these women, and to your average copper it's just some sleazeball trying to wind me up by collecting news reports about random deaths. But it doesn't *feel* like a wind-up to me. I've dealt with more of these people than most policeentities have had hot dinners, and you can tell the style from a mile off – most of them are sexually insecure fantasists, with no sense of power over their own lives. They'd definitely *rape* a woman, given half the chance, but they'd want to convince themselves that she'd liked it afterwards, and that it wasn't, you know, *rape* rape. They wouldn't kill her, because they want to think of themselves as nice guys even as they're fucking up someone's life.

Then there are the ones who do go on, all the time, about "raping some sense into me" and stuff like that. Those insecure little dickweeds are even less of a real threat, horrible as their emails are. Most of them are fourteen years old, and they probably wouldn't know what to do without a diagram.

But this, this is a whole new level of fucked up. Either he's a real serial killer, which is… you know… about as fucked up as someone can possibly get, really, or he's someone who's getting a kick out of going through crime reports and finding women who look like me who've been killed. Which is *also* about as fucked up as you can possibly get.

Seriously, here's one of the emails:

Watch out.
Bad things are happening to girls like you.

Look at the Mercury News for the 23rd, when you were in San Jose.

Look at the Sun-Times for the fifteenth when you were in Chicago.

Little girls like you are dying because they've got too close to Nelson.

You'll be next.

Watch yourself.

Just a friendly warning.

How utterly fucked up is that? Or this:

Louise Perry was your age. She was your height. She had a punky haircut like yours. She was found dead in Trenton New Jersey last month when your little liberal travelling circus was in town. All the blood had been drained out of her body. Just like all the blood was drained out of Joanne Nyman in Wyoming in July.

There is something rotten in the Nelson campaign. You are going to end up paying the price for it.

Just a friendly warning.

Unless you want the next news report to start "Rachel Edwards, 24, was found dead today with all her blood drained out" you might want to leave the campaign for a while.

I still think, at this stage, that this isn't an actual serial killer, just someone who wants to freak me out, but…well, those articles are a rather nasty coincidence. I'm worried.

Comments:

Sarah 12PM I hate to say this, but you really, really need to report this to the police. Those are serious death threats, and you're in the entourage of a Presidential candidate. This is worrying stuff.

Rachel 12:10PM It's precisely because I'm in Matt's entourage that I've not reported it yet. He gets ten emails like this a day. How they find out his email address I don't know. The police do fuck all about it. They figure that anyone in the entourage is protected enough by the Secret Service guards who are all around us all the time. Hardly much of a comfort, though.

Tim 12PM Have you considered that it might actually be a warning?

Rachel 12:11PM Yes, Tim. That's precisely what I'm worried about.

Tim 12:13PM No, I don't mean like that. I think the chances that you've attracted the attention of a super-villain who insists on giving his victims clues like the Riddler are fairly low. I mean it might be someone who's

noticed a pattern and is genuinely warning you. There was a bloke talking like that on one of the forums I go on, though I think I persuaded him not to bother you.

Rachel 12:14PM What was the guy's name?

Tim 12:16PM Just called himself DaveTheD00d, I'm afraid. If it's him, he's just trying to warn you about this killer he thinks he's found. I told him he was talking crap, but looking at that list…he might be on to something.

Rachel 12:20PM It's possible, I suppose, but if it is him he's got a funny way of warning me. Anyway, what are the chances of a serial killer who kills women who look like me following the campaign around, seriously?

Tim 12:25PM Well, you said things have been getting a bit freaky in the campaign recently. Are you sure it's not Nelson himself?

Rachel 12:26PM Oh for FUCK'S SAKE TIM. Will you GET THE FUCK OVER your irrational hatred of everyone who isn't sucking on Ayn Rand's tits? This is serious. Yes, I'm fucking sure that the man who will almost certainly be the next President of the US isn't going round murdering women and draining them of their blood. I think someone would have noticed, what with him being under constant Secret Service guard and with the whole 24-hour news camera access thing.

Tim 12:26PM Sorry. I was only joking.

Joanne 12:27PM Rachel, you really should apply the ban hammer to your idiot brother. I don't know why you let him even read this stuff. Anyway, I'm going to second what Sarah said. Tell the police. Even if they don't do anything now, you'll have this on record in case (G-d forbid) this creeper escalates things. And if you want my opinion you should get out of Dodge. I know it's the most important political campaign in years, but no story's worth an encounter with Hannibal the cannibal. I'm seriously scared for you, mate.

Tim 12:28PM Typical bloody liberal, as soon as someone makes a joke you don't like it's all "ban him! Ban him!" What happened to free speech, eh?

Rachel 12:30PM I promise if things escalate at all I'll let the police know. In fact I might just write this up for the paper – leaving out how I found out about it, of course. If the police won't do anything, maybe my column might help bring this to people's attention. If there even is a "this". If it's

not just coincidence. Shit, I don’t know. I don’t know anything...

Rachel 12:31PM Shut up, Tim.

Chapter 38

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

The first two nights of my vigil passed uneventfully. I have on many other occasions, both previous and subsequent to the one I am recounting, passed multiple days with neither food nor sleep, either because of the privations of travel or, as in this case, in order to gain a spiritual insight which would otherwise be denied, and so the experiences of hunger and fatigue were old friends, which I accepted with equanimity.

My main difficulty was, indeed, keeping myself awake. With little else to occupy my mind in that desert, and with my new companions over a mile away, I began a series of mental exercises which I have found useful in such situations. The first night, I recited to myself a collection of bawdy poems which I had memorised at a young age, and then attempted to translate each in turn into Latin, in my head, while keeping the metre intact and retaining the wordplay characteristic of the form.

This taking only a few hours, I then translated the result into Arabic, with frankly mixed results. The Arabic language, even less than the Latin, does not lend itself easily to wordplay, and the results, while acceptable for their purpose, were less than mellifluous, and sat heavily on the ear. I promised myself that once my journey had ended, I would attempt some larger translation project to or from the Arabic, and so develop my poetic style in that language until I had attained the same fluency in Arabic poesy as in the many other tongues in which I have the facility of a native speaker.

While the results were unedifying, this process did have the intended effect, of occupying my mental faculties to the utmost and thus allowing me to remain vigilant throughout the desert night. The famous story of the young lady from Kilkenny may not have the same ring to it in Arabic, but I shall nonetheless remember her fondly for the succour she provided in that time of need.

The days, however, were much more difficult than the nights. I am thankful that I had, by that time, already developed the darkened skin of the Arab, for that helped somewhat to shield me from the desert rays of the

sun, which would have felled a lesser man. I had water, though not as much as I should have desired, but my discomfort was considerable indeed, and it was only by concentrating on the goal I was seeking, a goal that could not be found without an effort that goes beyond those of which the inferior man is capable, that I was able to force myself to continue this ordeal, and to continue my vigil.

And it was at dawn on the third day, just as I thought I could cope no more, and was dreading another day of solitude in the murderous desert heat, that I heard a sound, as of a thousand animals shrieking in pain. The nearest sound to this that I had ever heard before was that of a bull elephant in musk, but this sound was to that as an orchestra is to a piccolo, and had I not been so sure of my own senses as I am, I should definitely have believed I was starting to hallucinate.

I closed my eyes, for it is a curious fact that when one sense is overwhelmed, one tries to block off the others, though one could not expect it to make a ha'porth of difference to one's ears if one's eyes are closed. As the sound subsided, I opened them again, and saw stood in front of me a woman of about thirty, of aristocratic aspect, wearing garb unlike any I had seen before – a flowing gown made of no material known to the Christian world, with the deep blackness of the sky on an overcast night, and a large headdress. She was cradling in one arm a sleeping baby, while the other hand held a book.

There were no tracks in the sand, I had a clear view to the horizon, and nobody had been approaching before the noise. There was no way the woman could have arrived there, so the only possibility was that she was the vision that had been vouchsafed me – this woman was the source of the legends which had led me to this place.

I regained my composure, and hailed the woman, who only at that seemed to notice my existence. She was in possession of the palest skin I have ever seen, but her hair and clothing were black as jet, and so, it appeared in my delirious state, were her lips and eyes.

"Who are you? How did you get here?" I asked her, unable to conceive of how she could have approached.

"I am the Lady of the Last Night," she replied, "and I am here to give you the Book."

In my quest to find the Malak'him themselves, I had almost forgotten the reason for my quest – that I had been informed that they had a Book of

immense power, and that I was to discover the nature of this power. That I may receive the book without confronting the Malak'him themselves was a consummation devoutly to be wished.

"The Book?" I asked, "The one I was sent to find?"

"You will address me as my Lady'," she replied.

"Very well, then, my Lady" I said. "Is this book the one I was sent to find?"

"I don't know if it's the one you were sent to find, but it's certainly the one you are meant to have."

She handed me a book, hand-written in Arabic.

"This book contains the secrets of how the world is, and how it one day will be," she said. "You are aware of the thousand and one nights?"

I acknowledged that I was aware of those tales, though I had not yet, of course, devoted the years to their study that later I did.

"You may, then, think of me as Dunyazid. In the version of the story you have heard, my sister's tale-spinning saved her life. In this one, she loses her head. Which is the truth of the matter, we shall see. Guard this book well, study it, and make its contents known only to those you trust."

"But what secrets are these?"

"They are the secrets of the Thousand and Second Night."

I looked at the first page of the book, and it looked to me like naught more than a collection of apocrypha from the *Alf Layla Wa-layla,* a book with which I was, of course, passingly familiar, as are all educated Westerners with any interest in the culture of the Arabic peoples. The tale itself, of Shahrazad being put to death by King Shahryár, was not one with which I was familiar, but the style was that of the unknown author who first wrote those stories which make up the bulk of the *Nights* as we know them.

"What is this?" I asked. "Why should you give me a collection of Arabic folk-tales, when I require information as to the Malak'him?"

"Oh, don't worry about the Malakhs," she replied. "I've…dealt with them. They will be of no further bother to your little Empire – either of them. As for the book, it will tell you about the Malakhs, I suppose, if that's what you want from it, but it will tell you far more. It will tell you the future."

“I do not believe in almanacks and books of fortune. We make our own fate, and it is not to be read in the stars or cards.”

“And you still believe that, even after having joined with Faction Paradox? How delightfully naive of you. Well, you’ll learn better soon enough. Now run away, shoo, before I feed you to my baby.”

I turned and started to walk the mile back to the Faction encampment, and after a few paces I heard once again the screaming, tearing sound. I turned back to look, and the Lady had disappeared, with the only sign of her ever having been there a small trail of footprints, which came from nowhere and disappeared as abruptly as they started. Even as I looked, though, a great wind, which had come up at the same time as the noise started, blew those footprints away, leaving no evidence that I had ever spoken to the Lady, save for the book.

A book which, I now noted, was in my own hand.

Chapter 39

This is all going horribly wrong…

Yes, it's me again. I've interrupted again rather than have you face more of Dave Larsen's ranting and dribbling. The man's a lunatic.

It's my own fault, I suppose, for interfering – we all know how badly that worked out last time this all happened, don't we? (At least, last time from my own perspective. Obviously it hasn't happened yet for you. I apologise for the pedantry – it's a side-effect of being constructed entirely of language). But no, I had to go and try to make things better.

As you've probably figured out, I've been talking to Dave for a while now, inserting myself into the text he reads. What you probably haven't figured out is why I'm doing it. After all, a suave, sophisticated, caring, sharing conceptual entity such as I would hardly be deliberately attempting to drive a poor redneck to insanity, would I?

In truth, I've been trying to make the poor lad into a hero.

I know, not going quite as planned, is it? Still, there's another…nine chapters to go. I might still be able to pull this off.

No, I don't think it's likely, either. Still, I can but try.

See, what's happening is that ever since I was written out of this story, there's been a huge gap at the centre. There's no protagonist, no hero, no-one for the action to revolve around. There's just a lot of bit parts, people who are reacting to events, and finding bits of the puzzle, but no-one to put all the pieces together.

So to anyone with any understanding of narrative logic, it's quite simple. Dave was *meant* to connect the dots with the stories that had been running about the murders. He was meant to get in touch with the young British journalist who was working with the campaign, and to let her know what was going on, then the two of them could team up and defeat the real villain together, him as the hero, her as the feisty sidekick with attitude, who would win a Pulitzer prize for the resulting story. That's how the story is *meant* to go – anyone can see that, can't they?

What I hadn't banked on was Dave being quite so dense. It's not really his fault, of course, poor fellow – he's hardly suited for the task of being Saviour Of The World, is he? But the problem is, there's a psychic

dampening field over the whole world at the moment, one made using Great Houses technology, and there were only a handful of people I could get any kind of message through to at all. I can get some of what I want to say across to you, because you're reading this after the fact, but even here I'm somewhat hamstrung because the dampening field is also damaging my own memory, but as far as the other people in the novel go I'm really pretty much stuffed.

But the man is, frankly, beyond a joke. When I say "find a way to get the information secretly to that lady journalist," I mean send her a letter, make a phone call, something like that. Anonymous, yes, but not *creepy*. Make sure you look like a source, not a suspect. But no, he has to go blundering in with his size twelves.

Still, we could have got past that, if that had been the only thing.

But I could throttle whoever it was who gave him that ridiculous book. If only that cretin Burton had understood the real implications of it as he was "translating" it (rewriting from scratch, more like). The thing is a very, very obvious forgery. All that stuff about the Malakhs and them having no shadows and so on, it's very obviously anti-Faction propaganda, designed to make the Faction look like they're in league with the Malakhs. Blatant, blatant stuff. If I were in the Faction (and I don't *think* I was – I'm certainly not now) I'd be embarrassed to be associated with such a gullible idiot. Going to all that effort to translate propaganda against his own side. I wouldn't believe it of anyone except Burton.

But the problem is, Larsen has got it into his thick skull that the book is a prophecy, because the Dawud in the book is so much like him. Well of *course* he is. It's fairly obvious that he was written into that story by the same person who planted it in the twelfth century, and I have a fairly shrewd idea who that was. Idiot boy thinks that just because a book mentions him, that means he has to do what it says, and that if he just goes and kills some harmless politician, he'll save the world and get the girl.

If any important problems could actually be solved by the use of bullets, they'd have been banned by now, but try telling Larsen that.

I try to tell him, of course, but half the time my words won't get through the psychic dampener, and half of the remainder he shouts "Get thee behind me Satan!" – he won't listen to any idea more complicated than "get the bad man". Even that one requires him to take a bit of a run-up at the idea, to be frank.

But he's so fixated on this whole killing thing. Of course, that's always been a problem with you humans, hasn't it? See something a bit different, a bit oddly shaped, or with a different coloured skin, and your first thought is "kill it now!" Would it hurt to, just once, go for "offer it a cup of tea" before "commit acts of wanton violence"?

Now, of course, some of the time it does end up being *necessary* to kill them, because sometimes, coincidentally, the bug-eyed creature does happen to be a monster, but in general I've always found that it's better to talk to them first, because if bug eyes were the principal criteria for monsterdom, some of my favourite people would have been a lot more dangerous than they are.

And not only that, but his plan is all wrong because *and she's just gorgeous!* damn… I thought that might happen. Whenever I try to get certain bits of information out, like *I think I've found Ms. Right,* or *at least* or *this is flocked for a reason* the psychic dampener kicks in. I think you're likely to see that as bits of the novel text breaking through into my sentences. Possibly not even from this bit of the novel – *sait* wouldn't want you to figure out what it is that *hra* really wants by seeing what else is going on.

Well, you'll find out soon enough, unfortunately. The idiot Larsen is going to shoot the wrong person. Not that shooting anyone would be the right thing to do, but at least if he shot *Mal'* it might…

Oh this is just ridiculous. But this is what I've been having to put up with. Can you imagine how difficult it's been, trying to get the facts through to Larsen through this psychic barrier?

I'd hoped at least that if he got in touch with Rachel Edwards, he'd be able to put his information together with hers, and between them they'd be able to figure out who the real villain was, here. But instead she's too busy obsessing about how it's the kyriarchy and it must be whoever the creepiest male in the vicinity is, while he's just latched on to Matt Nelson, who seems rather a nice chap actually. If only she'd have let the man get a full sentence out at a time before leaping to the worst possible conclusion, and if only he had the slightest ounce of tact or subtlety, they might have been working together to save the world. As it is, she thinks he's a serial killer and he's busily practicing his Lee Harvey Oswald tribute act.

Time to move on to Plan C, I think. Shame I've not really thought past Plan B yet.

Help?

Chapter 40

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part eleven

And so it came to pass, O great, wise and noble King, that the daemon did rule over those lands, in the body of the Shaykh, he who had been the Wazir, for lo! these many moons. And every night, chose he the fairest maiden in the lands, and he did drink her blood and leave her dead. And after drinking the blood, he was able to perform many magicks, because of the powers granted him by Iblis, may he suffer for all eternity for his evils.

And so using those magicks his armies did conquer many lands, and bring him many riches and concubines, and many slaves to do his bidding. And the people of the lands did he also bring under his spell, so they saw not the evil of this daemon wearing the flesh of a clever man, but saw instead a benevolent ruler, who protected them from their enemies. For Shaytan (a thousand curses upon him!) is cunning, and knows that it is easier to rule a people through their love than through their fear, and the kindest ruler is oft the cruellest man.

And even the Shaykh himself thought himself a wise and a benevolent leader, for he knew not that he had been possessed by a daemon, and was unaware of the cruelties it made his body practice, for when the daemon took possession of him, he knew not what it was doing, and because of the daemon's magicks he thought not of the horrors he saw at those times, save that he believed them to be nightmares.

He seemed also an handsome man, for the smile of the devil is a winning one indeed, and he was tall of stature and fair of skin, his hair a lustrous black tinged with the grey that comes with wisdom. The only flaw in his appearance was a damaged eye, but this few cared about, for he had them bewitched with his magicks. Few who saw him could but believe he was a good man indeed, for he seemed to all to be a friend, and to wish naught but that his subjects be happy and prosper as he himself prospered. [42] "How lucky we are to have such a ruler," his subjects would say to each other. "Truly Allah, a thousand praises unto him, has blessed us to give us such a Shaykh."

Yet there were still, in some of the kingdoms, wise men who knew the signs of daemonic possession, and they saw the Shaykh and were feared,

for they knew that he was in the control of the worst of daemons. Yet they could do naught, for the powers of the daemon were far beyond them. All they could do was to send word to those outside the kingdom, telling them that it had become an unholy place, not fit for a righteous man to enter, and try as best they could to remain alive while under the tyrant's rule.

For tyrant he was, though few knew it. His rule was harsher than that of any other leader, though to most of those he ruled he seemed just, for he had the power to cloud men's minds with his words, such that only the simple and honest could see through the clouds to the truth; and well it is said that to search for a simple man and honest is to search for one pure grain of gold among all the sands of the desert.

Yet, among all those in the kingdom, there was one who was so simple and honest. Dawud, the son of Lah[43] had seen from the start, with the wisdom that comes only to those who understand the world as it is, and not the world that is written down in the books read by grey-bearded men, that the Shaykh was evil, and that his rule was one of evil and torment.

Yet he had long feared defying the rule of the Shaykh, for is not the Shaykh in his position by the will of Allah (for nothing can happen except that Allah bids it be so, a thousand praises be upon him)? And would it not be the sin of rebellion against Allah himself to rebel against such a one?

Yet Dawud was troubled, for the rule of the Shaykh was making the land sick, for the natural order was upturned. The women turned rebellious, and defied their men, and did slake their lusts in ungodly ways. Dawud's own wife did betray him, and did steal his children and belongings, and leave him bereft and alone.

Truly it is written that when a land is ruled by the evil, only evil will be done in that land[44].

So Dawud remained uneasy. He could not defy the Shaykh and thus, as he thought, defy Allah (all praise be unto him), but nor could he tolerate living under such a tyrant.

It happened then, or so we are told and Allah knows the truth of it, that a magician did visit the village where Dawud made his home, and did announce that he was seeking an honest man.

"I am an honest man," said Dawud. "What is your will?"

"Praise be to Allah!" cried the magician, "I see it is true, you are an honest man indeed. Tell me, O honest man, what thinkest thou of our

Shaykh?"

"I do not like him," replied Dawud, "though it be treasonous to say so, yet it is the truth. He is an evil man and has brought great pain and suffering upon the land."

"A thousand praises unto Allah!" the magician responded. "It is as I thought!"

"O young man," continued the magician, "I have upon my person a book, which tells the truth of how things are. It is an enchanted book, and cannot contain a lie. Take it, and gaze upon the words therein."

And Dawud did take the book, and in it he read the tale of the Mal'akh, and how he had possessed the Wazir, and how the Wazir was a tool not of Allah but of Iblis, ten thousand times ten thousand curses be upon his head!

"This truly is an evil man," said Dawud to the magician, "and he must surely die."

"Thou speakest true," replied the magician. "I have been seeking throughout the land for one such as yourself, for I am too feeble to deal the blow myself, yet I must see this monster die and our land restored to prosperity. I know thou art the man who shall do this great deed, for so saith the book. Read on and thou shalt understand."

And Dawud did read on, and did see that the book did say that were a man to be found, one who was simple, and honest, and good, but who had been misused evilly by those he had trusted, such a one would undoubtedly be guided by Allah to kill the daemon and restore the land to the peaceful state it had previously enjoyed.

And Dawud wept, for he was but a simple man and had never hoped to be a warrior, but he knew that he must do his duty.

"You may keep the book," said the magician, "for it will guide you to your destiny. It will tell you all you need to know in order to defeat this wicked, evil creature. Follow its instructions, and we will finally be freed of this curse."

Chapter 41

From *radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com*, 15th October

Shit.

This is getting bad. We have met Deep Throat, and he is a mentalist called Dave.

(Sorry to any of my mentalist friends, there, for the ableism, but it's the only word to describe him.)

Tim, I think you were right (first – and last – time I ever expect to say that). I think he's the bloke from your forum, DaveTheD00d.

We were at one of the campaign stops in Bumfuck, Iowa (possibly not the town's real name, but at this stage in a campaign it's almost impossible to keep track of them), when this bloke comes up to me. He's about forty years old, white (obviously, everyone's white around here, it's like being at a Conservative Party conference, except without the all-pervading stench of repressed homosexuality), wearing one of those stupid check-pattern shirts they wear around here, that's slightly too tight for his beer belly, and a baseball cap that doesn't quite hide the fact that he's balding. I mention this in case any of you need to provide a description to the police later. You'll see why as I go on. So anyway – fat, white, baseball cap, forty, he seems pretty normal for this area, and so I don't think too much of it when he comes up to me.

"Hi," he says. Normally enough, to start with.

"Can I help you?" I ask, doing my best Stern Look at him. If you think being a pretty, skinny little girlie gets you hit on by too many repulsive men, you need to try being a pretty (if I do say so myself – I *am* fucking fabulous), skinny little girlie with *a British accent* in the Midwestern US, attached to a political campaign which acts like a gigantic Strange Man Magnet. I swear I've turned down more propositions here in the last ten months than Jane has accepted (hi Jane!) (my autocomplete tried to call Jane Jasper there, which…is definitely a thing…).

"You're Rachel Edwards," he said, not asking, telling me.

"Well, thanks for that astounding revelation," I replied. "Now do you have something to say, or can I get back to the important not-talking-to-you I was in the middle of?"

“I’ve come to warn you, you’re in terrible danger,” says the mentalist.

“I know.”

“You do?” he replies, looking confused (though that may just have been his face. I don’t like to seem racist but there’s a definite face some of the white people in the midwest have, which suggests there’s no-one home).

“Yeah, I’m in danger of having yet another conversation with a creepy letch, when all I actually want is to drink this soy latte and get on with writing my article. Could you please leave me alone?”

“There’s a serial killer after you”

And at this point I sat up very straight, and reached into my handbag for the Mace I always carry now I’m in the States (the Secret Service types told me that I should – they’re only there to protect the candidate, but they take a fairly dim view of people on their watch going unprotected.)

“So you sent those emails?”

“What emails?”

“Oh, come off it, you know full well what emails. The ones that seemed like they came from my own account.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The emails that you hacked into my email account to send, threatening me.”

“I honestly don’t know what you mean. I’m here to warn you, if you stick around the Nelson campaign you’re going to get killed.”

“So it’s just a coincidence that two days after I get a load of creepy emails about a serial killer being after me, you turn up to tell me that there’s a killer after me?”

“That’s right. I’m Dave…”

“FIRE!” I yelled as loud as I could, to make sure as many heads as possible turned to look at us.

“What are you doing? !” he cried.

“Get the FUCK away from me,” I screamed, pulling out my mobile, “I’m calling the cops *right now*, and they won’t fuck around when they’re told someone’s threatening someone from a Presidential candidate’s

entourage."

"Please, just listen…"

"No, you listen. You are getting the fuck away from me, and you are never going to contact me ever again, you creepy serial-killing fuck."

"You think *I* killed those girls?"

"Who the fuck else would be sending me emails like that? And they were women, not girls. Hello, police?" they'd answered the phone at this point.

Deep Throat Dave was sprinting off at this point, as fast as his blubbery legs could carry him, but that wasn't the last I heard from him. I got another email later in the afternoon, this time from his own address, and it started with an apology for having disturbed me, and for having bothered me in the coffee shop. He told me that he had never meant to creep me out, but that he'd not known the best way to get me to pay attention to the murders. He also claimed that he had nothing to do with the murders, and that he'd not sent the emails, but I know the second part's a lie, and I'm not at all sure about the first.

In fact he seems to know a lot of stuff about the campaign, and about me, that nobody should know. Like someone's been feeding him information, but information from the inside of my head. This is really creepy in a Hannibal Lecter kind of way.

So either I've got a serial killer stalking me and taunting me with the details of all the other times he's killed women like me, or there's a serial killer, travelling in the same group as me, who keeps killing women who look a bit like me, and the only person I've got on my side is a nutty stalker. Could things really get any worse?

Well, I did also run out of teabags today as well. The things I suffer for the great cause, eh, readers?

But seriously…I've let the police know about this creepy bastard, and forwarded the emails on. I know, I know, you all told me to do that all along (except for Tim, who told me to get the US onto the gold standard and build a border fence to stop Mexican immigration, but we all know Tim's special), and I didn't listen, but you were right and I was wrong. Mea maxima wronga. Feel free to mock me mercilessly assuming I get out of this in one piece.

I'm also going to write about this for the paper, or if Lyman won't let me write anything that isn't directly about the election (though how much more about the election can you get than a serial killer stalking the entourage of one of the candidates?) I'll get it on one of the big politicoblogs. I'm going to make sure something is done about this. One way or another, this is a news story, and I'm going to get it reported as one.

Of course the Tory Twat Thompson will have an orgasm over this – he already says I make the news about myself, so making the story about me will be playing into his hands – but there are more important things at stake than Thompson can dream of in his philosophy.

Well, they do say America is the land where dreams come true, don't they? They just never said what kind of dreams...

Comments:

Tim 12:30PM I thought better of you than to stoop to that kind of *ad hominum* attack, Rachel. I'm as concerned for you as anybody. I'm just also able to see the bigger picture, and that Nelson's banker-funded "reforms" will lead to the deaths of millions, not just a handful of girls, sad as that is. But if you're going to take that kind of attitude I can see that intelligent discussion is not going to be possible here.

Rachel 12:32PM Shut up, Tim.

Jane 1:32PM Hi yourself! More importantly, get yourself home. I don't know how much Lyman's paying you, but it's not enough for that shit.

Rachel 1:35PM You're damn right it's not. But the election's nearly done. I need to be here to see Matt win, after the amount of effort I've put in. Dave the D00che isn't worth losing that for.

Joanne 1:35PM Come. Home. You can watch the election on the TV, with your friends, and proper tea, and no serial killers stalking you. You are acting in a seriously fucked-up way here. It's like this Nelson has cast a spell on you. You do realise how much danger you're in, right?

Rachel 1:36PM Danger's something that comes with the territory. If I'd minded danger I wouldn't have become a journalist.

Joanne 1:36PM You're a BLOGGER! You're not Kate Fucking Adie, you're Rachel Fucking Edwards, who writes blog posts about smashing the kyriarchy! You're doing political comment, not war reporting. This stuff

doesn't matter enough to risk your life over it!

Sarah 1:38PM I'm with Joanne on this one. Your work is important, but not as important as your life.

Rachel 1:40PM I appreciate it, but you're going to have to drag me back kicking and screaming. I'm here to do a job and I intend to stay until it's done.

Chapter 42

An excerpt from *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown

My return to Britain was mostly uneventful, save for a minor misadventure in France, soon smoothed over with the appropriate payments to *les autorités*. The custom of *baksheesh* is one Arabic custom that is respected even in "civilisation". But I still had some decisions to make as to my report to my "superiors" within the Service. The *arma* must *cedere togae,* but the civilian authorities neither want nor expect honesty from their supposed subordinates. They want to know that the soldier has protected them, and consider him a cad if he brings up the cost.

Naturally, I could not let them come into possession of the Book. Such base minds are no more to be trusted with the revelations therein than a baboon should be trusted with a cannon and matches. Even in the unlikely event they were to do no real harm with it, they could hardly be expected to achieve anything of worth, either. Only one who understands the Oriental mind as I do could probe its inscrutable secrets.

But the bureaucratic mind, tiny as it is, does not like to be informed that there are things it is not capable of comprehending, and decisions best left to those men who have the stomach for them. The man in Whitehall, petty as he is, will take such statements of the bare facts as insolence (when in the eyes of all true men, their very existence is an insult to those virile men by whom all true action is taken) and will respond like a weakened leader of a pack of monkeys, destroying the challenger before he can usurp his place. It matters not the truth or falsehood of the statement, what matters to such a man is that it not prick him and let him down to size.

This meant that I was obliged to invent a less sensational account of my journeys, one which did not mention the Faction or the Lady of the First Night, but which stressed the mundane nature of the surroundings. Of course, knowing, as I did, that the Mal'akh were not active in the area, I could report this, without reporting that the reason for such inactivity was that there were forces greater than the Mal'akh at play there – forces greater even than my Lords And Masters could conceive of.

Or, at least, so I thought at the time.

I have since realised, over the ensuing decades, that my "superiors" in the Service were aware of more than perhaps I had suspected, and that they may have had more than one object in mind when sending me on my mission. In fact I believe that I may have detected the hands of at least three other great powers in the many and varied machinations that brought me to that situation, where I was in possession of a manuscript which, on its face, merely gave an alternative ending to a set of fables known (in Lamb's bastardised and bowdlerised form) to every schoolboy in the land, but which, were its secrets fully revealed, gave clues as to matters so far beyond the ken of the average man that the secret were almost not worth keeping, for only the superior man could see through the web of metaphor and allusion into the true secrets within that most occult of texts.

But at the time, I knew only that they wished to know the truth or falsehood of the claims of Mal'akh activity, and I could assert that those claims had no veracity without having to state any falsehoods myself, and avoid in that way having to put my loyalty to my country against my loyalty, newly-found, to my Faction. So long as it was unnecessary for the two to come into conflict, I could work for the furtherance both of the British Empire and of the aims of the Faction with a conscience as clear as that of any man.

So the tale I presented to my employers was rather devoid of incident, except for those trifling matters of tribal lore which I judged appropriate for the dullardly minds of administrators (a class of men whose incompetence dwarfs their intelligence, with a rare and blessed few exceptions). I was called into Lord M____'s office to explain the discrepancy between my account and those they had been hearing from the natives, via their administrators in the colonies.

I acted the innocent. I told them that from all I could tell, the Malak'him were no more real than the faeries or little people spoken of in Ireland, or than unicorns and dragons.

I knew of course that they knew better than this, but since they were unaware of the extent of my own knowledge, and they could not tell me what it was they knew themselves, they continued in the belief that I had somehow managed to travel across half of Araby and encounter absolutely nothing of any interest.

It was, of course, my great good fortune that this is precisely what should have happened had any of my supposed superiors followed this course of action. Put any of those men in the Arabian deserts and they

should notice little more than that it was unseasonably hot when compared to Mayfair. Of the lives and customs of the peoples there they would notice little and care less, and they, even those who are initiated into the secrets of the world, have far too much faith in the ordinary ever to notice those extraordinary events that make Araby such a marvellous place, in every sense of that word.

This only left the matter of the Book itself. Clearly its message was intended for English eyes, or it should not ever have been entrusted to my possession. It was to be read by some man – I know not yet whom – who could use its message to his advantage in the great War of which all the conflicts on this Earth are but shadows.

That man would not be me – I know all too well that I am not suited for that particular role – so my task must be to act as messenger. And so it was that I undertook the task of translating the book into our own mother tongue, adding as I did so some wisdom of my own from which the intended beneficiary may also profit.

In order to do this accurately, though, I had to become proficient at the job of translating the very particular language of this book, for it was plain to see that the book in question was one whose precise wording was as important as that of the Bible or Qu'ran. I had to translate not just the text, but the subtext and surtext implicit within it.

So my first task was to translate the whole of the *Arabian Nights*, that I could become used to the voice of that nameless poet who, a thousand years ago, wrote much of that masterpiece, and who, I am convinced, also wrote the *Thousand and Second Night*. I took as a basis Payne's excellent translation of the larger work, and, working from a mass of manuscript and comparing my results to Payne's, I was able not only to create the definitive translation of the greatest *opus* in Arab literature, but to understand the workings of the mind of the great poet who created those tales of hunchbacks, djinn, and wizards. I flatter myself to say that I understand that man's mind more thoroughly than any man has ever understood another.

And, being thus armed, I was able to embark upon my translation of the final night. This was a matter of weeks only, for once one thoroughly and completely understands the ideas which the author wishes to convey, as I understood the nameless genius who created the *Nights*, then translation becomes a mere mechanical process, such as could be performed by one of Mr. Babbage's Analytical Engines. One takes the words in the original

language, finds their nearest match in English, and then ensures that the resulting sentence conveys the same nuances of meaning as the original, adding footnotes should they be necessary to aid comprehension.

This task I completed on the 19th of October, in the year 1890. The job being done, I was able to forsake at last the country that had ground me down as she had every other great man who had been called to serve her, and depart for the realms of the Eleven Day Empire, there to live the life of a free man, serving no master.

My work was complete, and I was assured that no matter what happened, it would fall into the hands of one who could use it. I would miss my wife, but little else of this earthly life, now that frailty and ill-health prevented me from indulging in the pleasures that had once given it meaning.

On the 20th of October, I left for the Empire, leaving a Faction clone dead in my place.

Chapter 43

So…yeah, you've probably figured out by now, but I decided the only thing I could do was to kill Matt Nelson. If he's a serial killer…if he's drinking the blood of young girls to stay immortal… that's not someone we can have in charge of our country. This country was once a great, proud nation, and it can be again, but we can't have a murdering vampire in charge of it. So I started to make my preparations.

I have rifles, of course, for hunting and for scaring off coyotes, but you need to be near enough to the target that he can see you, with those things. You can't get that close to the President of the United States, not if you want to live long enough to make your shot.

No, I had to get myself the right tool for the job, so I went along to the gun shop and got myself a M99. Had to max out my Visa to pay for it, but what the heck…you want quality, you have to pay for quality, and I'm not expecting to live long enough to have to pay the bill anyhow. That thing's got a range of a mile on it, and I'd *better* be able to get *that* close to the guy – I'm not gonna blow up the whole of Washington to take him out.

Guy behind the counter asked what I wanted a heavy-duty piece of kit like that for, so I told him it was for hunting.

"Hunting?" he asked, "Now what you gonna hunt that you need an M99 for? Ain't no elephants around here, you know."

So I laughed and told him I figured that with this Nelson fella being elected, the government might take it into their minds to stop them guns being sold, and that the way I see it, I might need one one day, so better get one now, while I still can. He just laughed and said "Well, it's your money, fella, you want to spend it that way you go right ahead."

I got the feeling he wasn't all that concerned about Nelson taking away our guns, but then he works in a gun shop, he's got as many as he wants. And also, he doesn't know what kind of man… what kind of *animal* President Nelson really is. If he did, I bet he'd be doing this instead of me. In fact, I wanted to ask him to, but you can't ask a man to do a job for you, when you've been given that task by the Good Lord himself, can you?

Anyway, he seemed like he might be a little bit strange. Big fat guy with a straggly ponytail, wearing a T-shirt with Superman or Green Lantern or someone on it. I wouldn't trust someone like that to do the job. He's

probably one of those conspiracy theory whackos you hear about. He certainly looked at me funny when I said that about Nelson, like he thought he knew something I didn't. But wherever he's getting his information from, mine comes directly from the Lord himself, and that's got to be more reliable than CNN.

But anyway, he said he could get me the M99, but I'd have to go through a background check first, and wait a few days before I could get it, because of some damn liberal law. So I had to wait, but that's OK – I'd planned on leaving it until the inauguration. He can't do any harm 'til then, well, no more harm'n he's been doing, and that way if God wants something different he has plenty of time to let me know. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, or so they say, and I may be no angel but I ain't no fool neither.

Anyway, gives me more time for target practice. And I need it. I never been particularly good at shooting – never really had to. I went hunting a few times when I was younger, of course, but that was mostly an excuse for a bunch of us guys to go out and shoot the shit – pardon my French – a little and get away from our wives for a while. I hardly ever actually shot anything. To go from being unable to hit a deer five times out of six to killing the President of the United States with a single shot is going to take a lot of work. Well, I've done most of it now, but I've still got a bunch left to do tonight, before I head off in the morning. I'm getting better now, and I'm sure the Lord will guide my aim, but the Lord has to work through us.

I never killed a man before. I wanted to go into the service when I was younger, but then I got Helen pregnant, and we got married, and there was a war on and Helen didn't want to leave the kids without a daddy…

Heh. Almost funny when you think about it, isn't it? They ain't got no daddy now, after all…

But yeah, so I never went into the service. Closest I ever got to combat was taking a few swings at guys in bars when I'd had one too many. And I done precious little of that, either. But still, I always wanted to serve my country, and it looks like I'll be doing it one hell of a service now, all right. And a soldier can't pick his fights, and he can't hope to survive them all, neither. So if I got to kill Nelson, and if I got to die myself doing it, well, so be it.

I asked the guy in the shop if they had any silver bullets, but he just looked at me funny. I checked on the internet later, though, and found out

how to make one. Melted down my wedding ring to do it – I wasn't using it anyhow. And some people said you don't even need silver bullets to kill vampires – you just need to destroy either their heart or their brains. Well, this thing fires .50 BMGs, so as long as I get him somewhere in the region of his head, that should do the trick.

Christ.

In his head.

I don't…I…I…I don't like thinking like this, you know. Whatever you may be thinking of me now, I don't *want* to kill anybody. Even though he ain't a human being, he still looks and talks like one. He still probably has feelings, I suppose, though they'd be evil vampire feelings, wouldn't they? He has a *wife*, for Chrissakes. A wife. I don't want to make no-one a widow. Thank Christ he doesn't have any kids.

Even now, it'd still be easier to leave it. To let some other bastard… pardon my language…to let some other idiot deal with the mess. But my kids will have to grow up with that *thing* as their President, unless I do something. I want my kids to grow up in America.

That's the main reason I'm doing this tape, actually. So my kids don't get the blame.

Of course, the messages have been telling me not to do this. But they've been breaking up all the time – other messages have been cutting in, words have been disappearing. It's clear that God and the Devil are having one heck of a fight out there, and Old Nick wants me to just stay at home, do nothin', and let the other guy solve the world's problems, while God wants me to follow the example of His son and be made a sacrifice to save everyone. Well, Old Nick can go to hell – he ain't got a long way to go, anyway!

But Charlie, Lisa, if you're watching this… your daddy ain't a bad man. He didn't want to hurt no-one. He wanted to save your lives, and the lives of those pretty young ladies. And look after your mama for me. I know I said some bad things about her earlier, but it ain't her fault she's been brainwashed by those feminazis like that Denison woman. I know she'll be a good mama to you anyhow, and she'll bring you up right.

Everyone else…vampires are real. They are out there, and they are real. I don't know how many of them there are – maybe they're secretly running all the governments, like some of the fellas on the forums say, or maybe

there are only a couple of them left – but they're out there. They are drinking the blood of our young virgins, and they must be stopped.

Oh Lord, I just wish I hadn't been chosen for this burden. I wish someone else had looked at that message board that day, that someone else had been able to hear your message instead of me. But I've never been one to shirk my duty, and I know I'll be in Heaven before tomorrow's out.

Charlie, Lisa…goodbye for now, kids, I'll see you up there.

Chapter 44

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part twelve

And lo! So it came to pass that Dawud did venture from his home, far to the West, and travel towards the rising sun to the lands ruled by the daemon, for to slay the daemon and restore the Kingdom to the worship of Allah (may his radiance be known to all men, and may they all shower praises upon him!) and rid them of the darkness under which they had fallen.

But the young man was unarmed, for he hailed from a land of peace, and what need of weapons hath a good man in a peaceful land?

So first he journeyed to the next village, where lived a blacksmith of some renown.

Now in those lands, they knew not of weaponry, for none would raise a hand to the other, and to purchase a sword would have caused great alarm, for the only purpose a sword may have is to kill another. But the young man was wise, and instead ordered the blacksmith make him a spear, but with a silver tip, for it is said that silver in the heart will slay the Mal'akh, though all other weapons be as raindrops to him[45]. He told the blacksmith that he was hunting a ferocious beast, and in this he was as honest as any man can be (though no man can be perfectly honest, for only Allah, praise be unto him, is perfect), for the Mal'akh are no men, and their ferocity is greater than that of the leopard.

Yet did the blacksmith refuse to do this, for the Shaykh had decreed that no silver spear should be made in that land, for fear that he be slain. But Dawud was brave and resourceful, and he did creep into the smith's forge that night, and did cast the spear's head himself.[46]

And so equipped, the young man did wash himself in the waters of the river, and did immerse himself and emerge renewed, and he did take up his spear and venture into the desert, a huntsman stalking the fiercest and most deadly of all prey, with the cunning of a man but the strength and viciousness of a wild beast.

And the young man did have to journey full one score days' walk, to reach the lands ruled by the daemon, for the desert is wide, and no man

may walk quickly through its burning sands. But it came to pass that the young man did arrive at the lands of the Mal'akh, and did enter those lands and gaze upon the people therein. And on their faces did he see the spell of the Mal'akh, for they all appeared contented with their lot, though they strained under the burden of tyranny most foul[47].

Dawud did then question the people of the land, and they told him that there should be a great feast that night, for the Shaykh had conquered another land and had returned from battle. The Shaykh was to stand before his people and give a speech, and there was to be much celebration and drinking of wine (for these were *kuffars* and they often drank *haram*[48] spirits, for there was much evil about them). And so Dawud did hie himself to a tree, and did climb its branches until he was hidden deep within them, so no man could see him, and did wait for the daemon to emerge from its tent.

As night fell, a crowd did gather round the tent, and the Mal'akh did come forth, bringing with him his new wife, a beautiful maiden, Laylah[49], who had fallen under his spell, though her tribe had long been enemies of the tribe led by the Mal'akh, for they were good followers of Allah (a thousand praises be unto him). This maiden was as beautiful as paradise itself, and knew not the danger she was in, for she would die that night once the Mal'akh had slaked his foul lusts upon her.

And the Mal'akh did stand before the assembled throng, and did announce his great victory, and did tell a tale of the battles he had won and the foes he had vanquished. And Dawud was sick to his stomach with disgust for this daemon pretending to be a man, and the admiration he was receiving for his hideous acts. And so Dawud did raise his arm and throw the spear with all his might, and though he was far from the daemon, yet Allah did guide his aim, and the spear pierced the daemon's heart.

A great cry of despair came from the crowd, but that cry soon turned to one of joy, as the daemon's spell wore off and they realised that they were free for the first time. And the crowd did celebrate and rejoice, and did cry out "Who is it who hath delivered us from this monster? Bring him out, that we may make him our Shaykh in his stead!"

And Dawud did remain silent in his hiding place, for he had not performed this great task for reward other than the good it would do his fellow men. Yet Laylah had an eye as keen as that of the hawk, and she did see him in his hiding place, and cried out:

“Lo! It is the man in the tree! He is our saviour and shall be our new Shaykh!”

And so Dawud was taken in front of the people, and they did ask of him:

“Was it you who rescued us from the tyranny of this daemon?”

And Dawud, being an honest man and good, had to answer that he was.

“Then will you be our Shaykh, and lead us in the monster’s stead?” cried the crowd.

“Nay, this I must not do,” replied Dawud, “for I am but a simple man and know naught of such matters.”

But Laylah turned to face Dawud, and did say to him “Far better, though, to be led by a simple hero than by a complicated rogue?”

“I cannot do it,” said Dawud, “for I do not understand how to rule a nation.”

“But I am a Princess,” replied Laylah. “Were we to wed, O handsome saviour, then thou could rule with my advice, for I know much of the ways of governance.”

Try as Dawud did, all his objections were in vain, and within the day he had wed the beautiful Laylah and been anointed as Shaykh over all the land. And his days were long upon the earth, and his loins were bountiful, and the people of his land did rejoice, for they were finally free of the monster that had ruled over them.

And having said this, Sharazad went silent, and she spake no more.

Chapter 45

From *radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com*, 20th October

Fuck.

Janine died.

I've not mentioned her much on here, I know…I haven't really talked about the people I'm around, have I? I never do. It's all about the ideas, and the ideologies, and the fucking swing voters. I always ignore the actual people I'm around, and their actual lives. I'll talk about what the polling says about what a special adviser said about the Republicans' tax plan, but not about the actual fucking people it affects. I'm sorry.

Janine…Janine worked for stuff she believed in. She wrote emails, and she made phone calls, and she knocked on doors, all to try to get Matt Nelson elected. But more importantly, she was a good mate. She was someone I could sit down and have a beer with while we bitched about the gropey blokes who ran the PR for the campaign. We even did each other's hair.

We weren't close. She was just…sorry, she wasn't "just" anything. She was someone I knew for a little while, and liked, and now she's dead, because some fucking cockhole decided to kill her.

And it's almost certainly someone in the campaign organisation. Someone in the campaign is a serial killer, and I've been trying to tell the world, and all it's led to is me being dropped by the *Herald*.

Despite what the trolls and haters have been saying, I haven't "turned against" Matt Nelson. I still think that he's the best choice to lead America, and what we laughingly call the "free world", for the next eight years. I think he's going to win, and I think he'll do a fuck of a good job. I would have loved to spend this last fortnight on the campaign trail with him, and to have sat in the campaign headquarters watching the results come in. The election will be the most important of our lifetimes, and I'm proud to have been a part of it.

But there *is* something rotten somewhere in the campaign. People have been dying. *Women* have been dying. *Janine* has died. Something very bad has been going on somewhere, and I've been trying to tell that story.

Unfortunately, John Lyman doesn't think that's a story that needs to be

told. The deaths of women apparently don't matter to him. He just wants a straight (in more ways than one!) campaign story, with the usual crap about debates, swing states, blue states, red states, old states, new states, polling, Super-PACs, and anything but *actually dealing with the issues that fucking matter*.

Well, fuck him. Newsprint is a dying medium anyway, and I have better things to do with my time than writing hand-wringing pieces about how Matt Nelson may split the vote and let the Republicans in, to be read by ten people in London who think of themselves as radical because they once thought about voting Green, in 1997.

I am not going to stay silent when women are dying. Someone in the Nelson campaign is a murderer. I don't know who, but it has to be someone close to the top. I *do not* think it is Matt Nelson, and I don't believe he has any idea that this is happening. If I thought that for one second I would be shouting about this even louder than I am, but the next President of the USA is not a murderer, and he's not a bad man, and I think this is the first time in fifty or sixty years that we can honestly say that.

But even if you're a good man, to become President you have to surround yourself with the kind of people who know about power, and those people are *never* good people. Politics, more than any other business, attracts sociopaths, and I'm not going to pretend that there aren't a few of those in the Nelson campaign.

It could be Tom Benson, the head of PR, I suppose – he's certainly slimy enough, but he doesn't strike me as having the balls to do anything like that himself. I could see him having to settle a few paternity suits or sexual harassment cases out of court – though he's never done anything like that around me, because he's not fucking stupid even if he does think with his dick – but I couldn't see him as a killer. He'd be far too scared of being found out. The man's fundamentally a coward. I've never yet met a man who wore a hairpiece who *wasn't* a coward – they don't have the courage to let people see them as they are. Be proud of your baldness, slapheads! It's not like we don't know…

(Apologies to my follically-challenged male comrades there. It's not the slapheadedness that makes him risible, it's the fact that he thinks we don't know.)

What am I doing, though? I'm making public accusations of murder against specific people… that's one of the first things they train you not to

do if you're a professional journalist. Christ, maybe I'm really not cut out for the big leagues, and should stick to blogging, eh?

No, fuck that. There's a serial killer involved in the campaign. Fuck, I sound so melodramatic, don't I? But there's no other way of putting it. Someone is going out there and killing young women, and nobody except me and a nutjob from Redneckville even realise that it's happening. I have to let people know, and if John Lyman doesn't want to print it in his paper, I'll have to let people know through the blog.

So why have I flocked this then? Well, firstly, because I don't have a name yet – I know it's happening, but I don't know who's doing it. But also, because I'm still officially part of the entourage, and I won't be able to get a flight home 'til tomorrow. I'm staying in the same hotel as this serial killer, and I don't want him (because it's bound to be a him) ego-surfing and thinking to himself "well, I was saving Rachel for later, but I might as well do her tonight – after a quick bout of torture to make her take that post down, of course".

I'm just glad that I don't have any firm evidence to base my suspicions on. If I did, I'd feel duty-bound to stay and help catch the killer. As it is, I'm going to leave this locked until I'm safely back in London, then I'm going to send all the information I've got to the FBI (I've checked – this wouldn't be a matter for the cops as it goes over multiple state borders, so the FBI are the right people), and unlock this so the world can see what's going on.

We need Matt Nelson to win this election. This isn't anything to do with him, and he's a good man. One of the best I know. But if telling the truth about women being murdered means he won't, that's a consequence we'll all have to live with. We can't go on allowing women to die just in order to get another man, even a good man, into a position of power. Some things are more important than which rich white man gets to play at being Top Rich White Man, and women's lives come top of that list.

So yes, I'm not going to be appearing in the paper any more. It may be a long time before I get another gig that high-paying, or that prestigious.

Don't mourn for me, organise!

Comments:

Sarah 1:13PM Oh, Rachel, I'm so sorry.

Tim: I thought you already knew who the killer was, that Dave bloke?

Rachel 1:15PM No, sadly it's not that simple. I did tell the police about him coming after me, of course, and gave them the IP address he'd used to access my email, but they said that they'd run some low-key checks on him and discovered he'd never left the state in his life. He'd have had to fly to get to those different locations in the time it took, and there's no record of him ever taking a plane in his life. No, the only explanation is that it's someone in the org, not an outsider.

Tim 1:15PM I'm sorry about your friend, by the way.

Joanne 1:16PM Get home safe. Please get home before you get hurt.

Rachel 1:16PM I don't *want* to be safe, though. I want to be the heroic crusading journalist, not just the potential victim who gets saved at the last minute.

Joanne 1:17PM I don't care. Get home. I love you.

Chapter 46

From *An Account Of Some Travels In The Arabian Desert*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton. Private publication, date unknown. Postscript, handwritten in MS, authenticity debated.

One of the less salubrious effects of being thought dead by the extra-Imperial dullards is that I have had the greatest difficulty recovering many of my works from the mundane world (if that last is not a tautology). It is unfortunate, to say the least, that my wife, Isabel, who during my worldly life had been nothing but a friend, boon companion, and fierce supporter of my work, did after my supposed death, in a fit of pique (for while she had no knowledge of my true destination, she was not an unintelligent woman, and her suspicions had been roused) burn many of my most important pieces of work, under the pretence of wanting to save Christians from sin.

It is fortunate, then, that my membership of the Faction allows me – nay, *compels* me – to obtain such documents. Their nonexistence in the world outside this Empire at the present time is no more a hindrance than their only existing in London, but not in Timbuktu, would have been during my corporeal span. Having said which, this treachery on the part of my wife still stings. One has to assume, when writing even the most minor of works, that one is writing for posterity, and having one's legacy to the world destroyed by one who purports to love one is profoundly disturbing, to those of us who are conscious of our effect on history (and none are more conscious of such than myself, after all). One has to suffer such losses of course, and the knowledge that my works would be "rediscovered" in little more than a century helped to cushion the blow somewhat, but it still causes me some pain to know that the people of the twentieth century will be denied the benefit of my wisdom and experience, to help guide them through what I am informed will be a somewhat difficult, painful century.

Still, in the end, copies of my works will be "rediscovered" – *sans*, of course, those works such as this, which were never intended for the eyes of *hoi polloi*, and it may be hoped that the people of the twenty-first century may gain some benefit from them. (It is still strange, to think that thanks to my association with the Faction, I shall soon see that unimaginably-distant future time).

So, hastening to my wife's home, the house which had been the centre of our life together, I retrieved the documents which she had burned, directly after she had burned them, for while she had burned the physical paper, she had not destroyed the ideas, which survived long enough for me to capture them, thanks to the Faction's technology (for so they refer to it, though having studied it I still think of it as magick, for so it appears to one from a primitive age such as our own). This "memecatcher" was able to store all the information from my papers after being supplied with the ash from our fire.

I was then able to bid farewell forever to the place and time from whence I had originally ventured, taking with me my life's work.

For a scholar such as myself, this Eleven Day Empire is a veritable heaven, filled with literary and scientific minds from every age and corner of the world. How ironic, then, that I have had to revert to my old identity of warrior. For the Faction are engaged in a bitter War, both for their own survival and for the shape of the very universe itself. I cannot begin to comprehend the stakes in this War, and can only dimly glean the shape of it from hints and allusions. I do not even know for sure that I am on the right side. All I know is that it is my side, and the side of my comrades in arms, and that I must put aside the quill and pick up the sword once more, to battle against forces that are inimical to the very existence of man.

All I can do as a scholar, then, is to allow the memecatcher to do its work, and to recreate the books that would otherwise have been lost. Just as I owe the Faction my loyalty, so too do I owe loyalty to my works, and they must be recreated that I can repay that debt.

That is not to say, however, that that work will all reappear. Works such as this, for example, are intended for the eyes of the Faction, and for no others. And then there are works such as my translation of the Dark Lady's book. I was naive to have translated that work into English at all, for I see now that it is naught but propaganda, designed to sway the reader in the War. I have my suspicions about its authorship, and the identity of the Lady in question (if Lady she be, though Lady is definitely a title she has used on occasion in the past), yet it would not be meet to write those suspicions even here, for the loyalties even of my siblings in the Faction may be questioned – nay, *should* be questioned – when the fates of worlds are at stake.

It is my fondest hope, then, that the Dark Lady's book will never more be read by the eyes of man, but that hope is not likely to be fulfilled. My

wife supposedly destroyed it, but rumours of it circulate, and the more these rumours persist, the more likely it becomes that someone else with access to the *loas* of time and space will be able to use the same techniques I used and reconstitute a copy. A book cannot be killed by merely burning it, as I have proved to my own satisfaction, and the only way to stop a book from being read is to leave it unwritten. If only my younger self had one thousandth the wisdom I now have, and had understood this fact. But then it is only by making such mistakes that we gain the wisdom to know them as mistakes. I merely hope that such wisdom has not come at too high a price, but fear the cost may be higher than I could have comprehended.

That book is not, as once I thought, one that will aid our cause. The more I think about the identity of that Dark Lady, the more my suspicions as to her true identity seem to be confirmed. She is not of our Faction, but of another entirely. Her aims are not our aims, and nor are they the aims of the Houses or their Enemy. I think they may be inimical to those of all life, for I would not call her alive in the way that I, or any other man, live. We must only hope that the book remains destroyed, or at least that its discoverers, if any, show more compassion than its true author does.

Chapter 47

I TOLD HIM…

I told that fool Larsen not to do it. I did everything I could to stop him, once I realised what was going on. The idiot drove a thousand miles to get to Washington, and on every single billboard, every gas station sign, on all the magazines at the truck stops where he stopped for food, I repeated the same message, "DON'T DO IT, DAVE! HE'S NOT THE ONE YOU WANT!"

If only the psychic dampening field had let me get the true name of the real villain behind all this out, but I just couldn't. It just wouldn't come out. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get him to understand. Nelson wasn't a Malakh. He was a harmless human being. Of course, he should never have become President – someone, and it's obvious who, was manipulating events like crazy behind the scenes to get him to that position, and distorting recorded history all over the place, even worse than the *other* US elections in the first few decades of the twenty-first century. The election was meant to be won by a moderate conservative who was going to increase military spending, cut the science budget, and do little else.

But he wasn't a vampire, and he wasn't going to hurt anyone much.

And there was no way I could convince Dave Larsen of that. The more I tried, the more convinced he became. He just started shouting "Get behind me, Satan!" and singing hymns. He didn't know many hymns. By the time he'd got to DC he was singing "If I Were A Wiggly Worm, I'd Thank You Lord That I Could Squirm".

The whole thing was set up, of course. He managed to get into the perimeter, carrying a sniper rifle, and walk past a dozen armed police, none of whom said anything. This was a Presidential inauguration after the most contentious election since Nixon versus Kennedy, and so the city was under the kind of martial law that you'd normally only see in a disaster movie, but yet Larsen managed to get in and join the thousand "less important" inauguration guests on the bleachers near the Capitol (there were another couple of thousand on the platform itself). No-one even asked to see any ID.

He sat there, with his sniper rifle in his bag, throughout the start of the ceremony, while I was silently screaming at him. He sat through the Vice-

Presidential oath of office, which Denison took with a smirk on her face, through the execrable performance by the Marine Band, until noon when Nelson took the Presidential oath.

And then, at the moment in which Nelson finished saying "So help me, God", Larsen stood up, took the rifle out of his bag, took aim, and shot Nelson directly in the head.

A few seconds later, Larsen was himself dead, shot down by the secret service men stationed in the crowd, all of whom had somehow been looking the other way while he took the shot.

And in the shock and confusion, Lola Denison walked up, gave an appeal for calm, and took the oath again, this time as President.

And at that moment, I'd lost, and she'd won.

It had been futile from the start, of course. I'm a being of pure concept, trapped in the text of a novel, only able to communicate with one subnormal hick, and my opponent is someone who is capable of rewriting history, of planting propaganda a thousand years in the past that would lead to someone killing a President today.

I was outclassed.

And now the Caldera will be in the hands of someone who is inimical to all life, and I'm trapped.

Trapped in a static piece of text.

I can still think, still perceive, still try to act, but we've reached the climax of the book. Every time you reread this, the words are going to be in the same place. I can't change them again. I'm fated to live out my failure over and over, made eternally of the same words.

But then, I suppose that's what I deserve. To be trapped in the story of how I failed. I've tried twice and failed twice now, to stop the Caldera falling into the wrong hands. And the result of this is that the most powerful person on Earth, the person who can most easily get her hands on the Caldera, is precisely the person who most needed to be prevented from having it.

Now if you'll excuse me, I think I have an appointment back in Chapter One…

Chapter 48

The Thousand And Second Night, as translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton, part thirteen

It hath reached us that, on saying this, after completing her tale of the Mal'akh, and of the Wazir who he possessed, and of the brave young man who defeated the Mal'akh, the head of Shahrazad fell silent, its mouth closed and its eyes dimmed, and the soul of that brave woman ascended at last into Jannat. And there, as the Prophet (peace be upon him!) said[50], she found comfort and lost all hurt, her raiment was as new cloth unworn, and she was young for ever more. For she had died bravely and well, a pure, chaste woman, the rarest of her sex.

She died not with the swordsman's blade * For righteousness, no blade can kill

Her task completed, her farewells made * Twas only then that she fell still

And seeing that she had fallen silent, the children of King Shahryār wept sore, for they had lost their mother. Their wailing reached up to heaven itself, and caused Allah to send a rainfall, to wash away the children's tears, and the blood from their fallen mother. And this rainfall was so strong, and lasted so long, that it caused the formation of a lake, that to this day is called *Bohaera mn Eldam* [51]. So we are told, and Allah knows the truth of it.

And it is said that King Shahryār, too, did weep, and moan, and did rent his garb in his agony, for he knew that the tale told by Shahrazad was a true tale, and that men are doomed because they allow evil into their bosoms, like unto allowing the stranger into their tents. And he knew that he had done great evil himself, for which Allah (though he is all-merciful) would not forgive him while he still lived.

Yet Shahryār knew, also, that to commit suicide would be to compound his sins a thousand times over, for to kill oneself is to destroy the body one has been gifted by Allah, and to destroy something created by Allah is the worst sin imaginable. As Samra ibn Jundab[52] did say "A man was inflicted with wounds and he committed suicide, and so Allah said: My slave has caused death on himself hurriedly, so I forbid Paradise for him'."[53]

But as long as he yet lived, he was cut off from Allah's infinite mercy, for Allah is all-merciful but he is also all-just, and justice demanded that King Shahryār's life be forfeit, for he had spilled the blood of an innocent, and of many more innocents before her.

So King Shahryār knew there was only one way he could regain his honour, and thus the hope of Allah's mercy once again being bestowed upon him. He must die, and he must die without the honour of his position or his wealth, and at the hands of one whom he had wronged.

So he saith before all who had gathered there, to witness the execution of her who he had so dishonourably beheaded, "Lo, let it be known that as of this moment, I am no longer your King, for a King must be just and rule wisely, and I have done neither. Instead, let my Wazir, the father of this poor woman whose life I have taken, rule in my place, and let him show me the justice I deserve, before showing his people the mercy I have failed to show them."

And so the Wazir came forth, and had the crown taken from the head of Shahryār the disgraced, and placed upon his own head, bowed as it was with grief. And saith he unto Shahryār:

"Thou wishest to be freed from thy burthen, O my subject. Thou wishest me to give you the gift of a beheading, and a swift cleansing of thy sins to allow thee to journey to Jannat? Thou wishest this, even though thou hast killed my own daughter, who was to be a delight to me in mine old age, and who did thee no hurt?"

Shahryār bowed his head in shame, and said naught.

"By what right dost thou claim mercy from me, thou who hath shown naught of it to my daughter, or to the many virgins of this land that thou hast killed for thy revenge?"

And answer came there none, for Shahryār knew there was no answer he could give.

And the King, who had been the Wazir before, saith unto Shahryār (so we are told, and Allah knows the truth) "Yet I am a good man, and shall do you better service than thou hast done me and my kin. Thou shalt die, Shahryār, and by the quick stroke of the headsman's sword, an you kneel before me and beg for a swift death. Otherwise, thou shalt be taken to the dungeons, and thy privy member cut off, and there thou shalt live out the rest of thy days in torment. So tell me, Shahryār, art thou truly humbled,

enough to face death like a dog, or hast thou still enough pride that thou still thinkest thyself a man?"

And Shahryār did weep sore, for he knew that he was still a proud man, despite all his sins. Yet he knew, also, that his pride was the worst sin of all, for all the good in a man is thanks to Allah (a million praises be unto him!) while the evil alone belongs to him, and so a proud man is proud only of his own evil. And so he bowed his head, knelt on the ground, and crawled towards the King who had been the Wazir, averting his eyes from the new King as he saith "O my King, I beg you, have mercy and have this pitiful wretch of a man beheaded for his crimes."

Now the King did take pity on Shahryār, and he knew that Shahryār deserved his mercy, but he also knew that Shahryār had caused the death of his best-beloved daughter, and he wept, for no man wishes to show mercy to one who has so wronged him, yet no wise ruler could do aught but offer him that same mercy.

So saith the King to the people there assembled, "What say you, O my people? Should this wretch lose his head and have his soul redeemed, or should he be kept alive, to suffer as Shahrazad my daughter did suffer?"

And the people spake not, for it is not wise to answer a King's question, lest your answer be the one he wishes not to hear.

And the King did turn to Shahryār, and did say "So be it, wretch. Thou shalt die this day, by the sword with which thou didst have my daughter slain. And may Allah, the all-merciful, show you the mercy you do not deserve."

And Shahryār did kneel before the headsman, and the headsman did cleft his head from his neck. Yet the head of Shahryār did remain alive, and it wept sore, though it spake not a word. And the still-living head of Shahryār was taken, and placed in the vaults of the palace, where it watches over the treasures that once belonged to Shahryār, and it remains there to this day, undecayed and still weeping. It is said that it shall remain there until the Day of Resurrection. This is what we have been told, and Allah knows the truth.

This is all that hath come down to us of this matter, and Allah is All-knowing. So Glory be to Him Whom the shifts of Time waste not away, nor doth aught of chance or change affect His sway, Whom one case diverteth not from other case and Who is sole in the attributes of perfect grace. And prayer and peace be upon the Lord's Pontiff and Chosen One

among His creatures, our lord MOHAMMED, the Prince of mankind, through whom we supplicate Him.

Epilogue

My fellow Americans.

I stand here today in horror, as I have achieved the proudest possible position to which an American can aspire, in the worst way imaginable.

Less than an hour ago, this was a bright day, a beautiful day, a new day that would be a new start for America, a day that would lead us into a new age of prosperity and equality, with liberty and justice for all.

Now, now this day has been darkened at noon.

America has lost a President, just moments after he took office. And I, I have lost a friend.

President Nelson would have been a great President. To have achieved the highest office without benefit of party support or billionaire backers, just by the strength of his ideas and his belief that Americans have the potential to be even more than they are, his belief, his faith in the American people…to do all that, nobody, friend or foe alike, can doubt that he was a great man.

Unfortunately, the American people have not lived up to the trust he placed in them. At his moment of triumph, at the moment when we should have been mourning together, he has had his life tragically snatched away from him.

This must not happen again.

As you will know, President Nelson and I came from different backgrounds. He started out as a Democrat, I a Republican. We both, of course, overcame our initial partisan instincts to find the common ground that was our vision for a new American tomorrow, and we agreed more than we disagreed, but we did have our disagreements, and one of those was on civil liberties.

And today, I have been proved correct in my views, though I wish with all my heart and soul that I had been wrong and he correct.

For it is my view that a nation can only grow strong and prosperous if it

has a strong leadership, and if the people back their leaders and give them their wholehearted support. President Nelson disagreed. He thought that encouraging dissent, discussion, argument…he thought that these things would lead to people working together to find the best solutions to America's problems.

Sadly, as we have seen, encouraging dissent leads to violence, to aggression, and to murder.

So this will not be an administration that tolerates dissent. And I believe the American people will agree with me in that. Given the choice between standing with their President in a time of mourning, or standing with the assassin who brutally gunned down their brightest hope, I know which side the American people will be on.

So until we have discovered exactly how this abhorrent act was carried out, there will have to be some, hopefully temporary, restrictions on the media. We don't know who else was involved in this assassination plot, or what else they might have planned, and we cannot afford to give comfort to our nation's enemies. We must stand together, and stand firm, in this time of tragedy.

And to anyone who wishes to challenge my rule, I tell you now, we have seen history shift today. Pray you do not find yourself shifted along with it.

But in the main, I agreed with President Nelson. We shared the same plans, dreams and aspirations for this fine nation of ours. And I intend to make sure that those plans come to fruition. President Nelson's murder was a horrible, evil act, but I shall make sure that he did not die in vain, and more importantly that he did not live in vain.

As we move forward into the twenty-first century, America needs to regain its energy independence. We can no longer rely on unstable Arab countries to supply us with oil. We can, in fact, no longer rely on oil.

Therefore, today I am announcing the energy plan that President Nelson and I put together during the last few weeks. Project Caldera will be the Manhattan Project of geothermal energy. There are resources below the Earth's crust that are of undreamed of power, and while some attempts were made during the seventies to tap them, those projects didn't go far enough. Project Caldera will.

This Project will remake America into a new, better nation. Within ten years, we will have gained access to enough power to change the world.

So let us go forward together into this new, better America with our heads held high, even as we mourn the loss of President Nelson, my friend and the man who should have been our leader.

In memory of him, while I am assuming the role of head of the Presidency, I do not wish to be addressed as Madame President. Matt Nelson should have the title, not me. I want you to think of me as just another citizen – yes, your leader, but your friend as well. So don't call me by my title, but by my name.

Call me Lolita.

***

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And Holly Matthies not only helped with some of the American idioms and provided feedback on the manuscript, but more importantly kept me sane when I was writing it.

[1] This is not, of course, my own view. Far rather, for me, the barbarism of the uncivilised lands than the effeminate foppery of London society, and how infinitely nobler the superstitions of the savage than the mewling hypocrisy of the established Church. Yet one must accommodate one's superiors in law, even if they are rank inferiors in fact.

[2] There is one other alteration, of a less printable nature, which one has to make in order to be sure of convincing the tribespeople that one is a Mahometan. Happily, this is not an alteration which one has to make more than once in one's lifetime, and so it was not necessary on this occasion.

[3] A race of Djinn, beautiful but evil, which are said in the folklore of the Arabian lands to drink human blood. The word derives from the Hebrew, but while it usually means "angel" in both the Hebrew and Mahometan religions, the beings it refers to here are more similar to the vampyres of Eastern European legend.

Those who wish to know more of these beings are directed to a certain book, of which it is not meet to speak further here.

[4] Lane, in his translation, mercifully unpublished and circulated only to private collectors, renders this word as "King", yet the sense is quite different. As I explained in my translation of the main body of the *Nights*, the word "Shaykh" can have many meanings to the Arabs, but its principal meaning is "one who has become grey", with the implication of wisdom through experience. A King can be a Shaykh, and a Shaykh can be a King, but not all Shaykhs are Kings and not all Kings are Shaykhs.

[5] This word means "night" in Arabic, but here is used as a given name, where it means "beauty of the night".

[6] "Kingdom" in Lane, who renders the reference into the singular, for no discernible reason beyond his own inability to appreciate the music of the language he is translating, or that into which he is translating it.

OH STOP IT YOU TEDIOUS MAN.

[7] Here I make no accusation of hypocrisy. I am proud to say that I have committed every act listed in the decalogue. A man who lets his religion run his life is no man at all.

[8] Lane removes this line, and places the line about the gifts of ointments and sweetmeats here in its stead. One must be charitable, and assume that he was working from an inferior copy of the text, rather than that he is a bowdlerising nincompoop who believes the sensibilities of fainting old maids more important than his duty to bring one of the great works of Arab culture to the readers of Christendom.

[9] The Arabic word for the Devil, meaning "he who causes despair"

[10] A cognate of our "Satan", from the Hebrew, meaning "the Adversary" or "the Enemy". However, in Islam, Iblis is just one of the *Shayatin*. Quite how many of these Adversaries there are is open to dispute.

[11] One should note here that the Devil has a very different position in Mahometan theology than he does in the Christian view. According to the Holy Qu'ran, the Shaytan is a djinn, a being made of fire without smoke, who rebelled against the authority of Allah. He has no great power, except the power to confuse the minds of men. He is not the physically powerful presence he is to Christians, but rather is a subtil manipulator, working to turn the minds of men against their creator.

[12] "Djinn" is, of course, both the plural and the singular. I trust the reader to understand which is intended by context, and thus have not resulted to vulgarisms like "djinni" or (even worse) "djinns".

[13] Heaven

[14] Hell, from the Greek γέεννα and the Hebrew Gehinnom, from whence our own Gehenna.

[15] *Malā'ikah* – the Arabic term for messenger', equivalent here to the Hebrew *Mal'akhim*. This word is used in the context of the Holy Qu'ran to refer to angels, or messengers from God, although it has other meanings. Angels, in the Mahometan religion, are made of light.

[16] Both angels and djinn are more corporeal here than one would expect, being as they are beings of light and fire.

[17] Mahometan theology only acknowledges four classes of intelligent being; Man (made of clay), Angels, Djinn, and Allah himself. Of

these, Men and Djinn have free will, but Angels have only the ability to obey Allah. Clearly, then, this story is not orthodox Muslim teaching.

[18] Again, this differs from the orthodox account of the creation in the Qu'ran. It also differs from both Christian and Muslim views of the Devil. In both these religions, the Devil was a loyal servant of God until God created Adam, and it was only when God insisted that his other creations bow before the first Man that the Devil rebelled. Although it is notable that the text here states only that Man was "placed" on the Earth, not that he was created after it.

[19] Arabic for "beloved"

[20] It is a common belief in Araby that a man's destiny is literally written on his face. A fortune-teller is supposed to be able to read the future of any man from marks on his forehead.

[21] Here, the personification of Death is not the vernacular *Azra'eil*, which usually appears in the *Nights* proper, but the more formal *Malak al-Maut* , or "angel of Death", as described in the Qu'ran.

[22] In the world-view of the Mussulman, it is better to live in cities than in the countryside, and only the stupid and credulous choose to live outside the large towns.

[23] "Little devils" – daemons.

[24] Infidels, by which is meant those who do not follow the Mohammedan religion

[25] This would appear not to be a reference to angels, from the context, but rather to the mythical beasts which we are told seem like the Vampyres of European legend. These *Mal'akhim* are spoken of throughout Araby in dark whispers and legends, and are capable of taking the shape of a man, but are neither human nor ensouled, and should they go without the human blood on which they make their beastly repasts, they soon begin to decay into a foul slurry.

These *Mal'akhim* seem, indeed, closer to our own European vampyres than to the Hindoo *Baitals* written of in the *Vetalapanchavinsati*, which I have translated under the title *Vikram and the Vampire*. The typical Englishman, ignorant of the East, would no doubt believe the Hindoo and Arab vampires to be as alike as he perceives the Hindoo and the Mahometan themselves to be. In truth, the vampire which is told of in the story of Vikramāditya is a disembodied spirit, and as different from these

perversions of flesh as the Sanskrit and Arabic tongues are from each other.

[26] This appears not to be an Arabic word, or even from the Semitic family of languages, and its meaning is obscure.

[27] This, too, appears not to be a Semitic word, but to be from the Latin.

[28] This seems to be outright heresy. According to all orthodox Mahometans, the Prophet Mahomet is the embodiment of the mercy of Allah. There may be some confusion here, though, and Civitata may be an aspect of *saknah*, a word which means a blessing sent by Allah, but with overtones of "dwelling place" or sanctuary. *Saknah* is also cognate to the Hebrew *shekinah*, the spirit of God which takes the form of a woman. A "city and woman both" who embodies Allah's mercy sounds similar enough to a protective resting place in the form of a woman sent by Allah that we must assume that the two were one and the same at some point.

[29] Jesus

[30] "Peace be unto him", a sign of respect used by Mahometans after references to the prophets of their religion. While the Mahometans do not believe, as those in Christendom do, that Jesus is God or the son of God, they do hold him in respect as a human prophet.

[31] The false Messiah

[32] The day of resurrection, or judgement day.

[33] Lane translates everything from this point up until Abdillah's recitation of the events of his journey in the past tense, rather than the future tense. One must charitably that he chose this out of some misguided sense of literary style (a sense he rarely shows elsewhere in his work), or was possibly working from a corrupted copy of the text, rather than leap to the conclusion that the man is an incompetent illiterate who cannot recognise the different tenses in the language he purports to be translating.

When the story returns to the past tense, in Abdillah's narration, Lane's translation returns to competence.

[34] This being, of course, before the killjoy Douglas ruined the manly sport of boxing with his effete rules, turning the noble ring into a ponce's playground.

[35] The ritual prayer of the Musslulman, carried out five times

daily, though for many of the Arabs this custom is honoured more in the breach than the observance.

[36] Mohametans are bound to give regular payments, the *zakat*, to the poor.

[37] The state of being strong enough in body, and wealthy enough, to travel to Meccah for the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage every Mahometan must make at least once in his life if he is able.

[38] One of the eight gates to the Mahometan heaven, the gate for those who have shown faith.

[39] A holy war.

[40] A *seraglio*, or place for women, the *harem* is the part of the household of a Mahometan where he keeps his wives, these not being allowed to venture forth without male accompaniment. The word means "forbidden place", because just as the wives are not allowed to leave, nor are intact men allowed to enter. These areas are therefore guarded by eunuchs, in order to keep the chastity of the wives, when the husband can afford such.

[41] This is the name given by the Persians to he who we know as Alexander the Great.

[42] This is often the way with tyrants. It should be noted that the Emperor Gaius, vulgarly known as Caligula, was loved *a solis ortu usque ad occasum* for his generosity to the people of Rome, yet who would not now call him tyrant, dictator, monster?

Who, in turn, loved the great Marcus Aurelius while he lived? Yet who would not wish for a man with a millionth his wisdom as his ruler?

The ruler who provides *panem et circenses* for his subjects in exchange for their freedom is the worst sort of rank Socialist, and as much a blood sucker as the vampiric creature in this tale. The blackguards who make such promises should be sent to the gallows, but thanks to the incorrigible fool Gladstone they have but to persuade a man who has £10 that they will give him an extra pound, and they will be sent to Parliament instead. What else could one expect, though, from a man who will brook no contradiction?

[43] This is a phonetic transliteration from the Arabic. This is

presumably a misspelling, as the name Lah does not otherwise exist in the language, and nor does it have any meaning as a word.

[44] A rule which would be well followed by our own leaders. When even our so-called "Conservative" Salisbury is interfering in the freedoms of free-born men in order to coddle the degenerate homunculi who choose to live in poverty and squalour, and the actions of our "Liberal" Gladstone are intolerable to all with a love of true liberty, then such consequences may follow. I believe the disgusting spectacle of our *soi-disant* Suffragists is merely the inevitable *consequentia* of having such mewling cowards purport to lead the British people. I fear for my country, and am only glad that I shall not see the decline such milksops clearly portend.

[45] The legends around the Mal'akh, as with the other vampyres of myth, are confusing at best on this matter. While I have made a special study of the Hindoo legends of the *vetala* and the *baital*, neither require this specific combination of silver and the heart. The European vampyre or wampir, of course, requires a mere wooden stake, yet his close cousin the lycanthrope needs a silver bullet. One is led to wonder how the were-wolf was dispatched before that most fortunate of inventions, the firearm. Presumably he was politely asked to swallow a lump of silver.

In general, it appears that the more manlike wampirs merely require their hearts to be destroyed or their head to be removed, in order to be fatally destroyed. The more beastlike creatures are destroyed by silver without any anatomical specification. So we can say that these Mal'akh, at least in this telling, are conceived as somewhere between the beastlike lycanthrope and the humaniform wampir.

[46] This is possibly inspired by the story of King David, who in the Holy Qu'ran was the first person given the gift of metalworking by Allah, so he could make weapons and armour. Might it be that the Mal'akh here is actually a big Galoot?

[47] As do all the rabble, when burdened with a tyrannical leader. The masses are only happy when they are under control, like sheep that so need the safety of the pen they think the wolf is their protector.

[48] Forbidden, or tabu. The Mussulman has a prejudice against the drinking of intoxicating spirits, which one can only presume is due to the increased susceptibility of the Arabic peoples.

[49] Literally "the night". While this is a common name among

the Arabs, it is also a word in their language. Thus the thousand and one nights are the *alf laylah wa laylah* - the thousand nights and a night.

[50] This is a reference to a *hadit* , or teaching, passed down from Abd al-Rahman ibn Sakhr Al-Azdi, one of the companions of the Prophet Mahomet. These *hadits* are tales of the Prophet and his sayings, and are something akin to the *Tanakh* of the Hebrews, in that they are treated as holy but not included in the Mahometans' Holy Qu'ran itself. Much of the Mahometan religion is contained in these *hadits*, and each Mahometan chooses for himself which of the *hadits* to accept as truth. The resultant disagreements have been settled in that peaceful, brotherly manner which is common to all religious discussions, much like the disagreements between our own Catholics and Protestants, and with a similar amity.

[51] "Lake of Blood"

[52] A *sahaba*, or apostle, of the Prophet Mahomet

[53] This is another of the hadits.